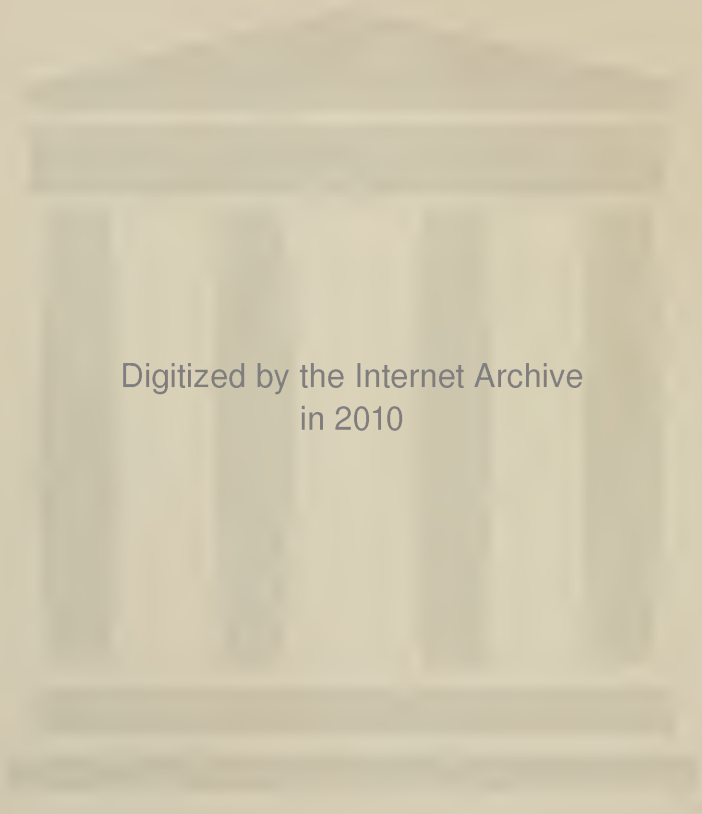

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The Writings

of

OSCAR WILDE

Uniform Edition

Illustrated

LONDON AND NEW YORK
A.R. KELLER & CO.
(Incorporated)
·1907·

UNIFORM EDITION

THE WRITINGS

OF

OSCAR WILDE

A Woman of no Importance

An Ideal Husband

ILLUSTRATED

London: New York:
A. R. KELLER & CO., INC.
1907

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A Woman of No Importance.

ILLUSTRATIONS.

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"'Well, dear mother, I hope you have settled it all with Lord Illingworth?'"	97
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THE PERSONS OF THE PLAY.

LORD ILLINGWORTH
SIR JOHN PONTEFRACT
LORD ALFRED RUFFORD
MR. KELVIL, M.P.
THE VEN. ARCHDEACON DAUBENY, D.D.
GERALD ARBUTHNOT
FARQUHAR, Butler
FRANCIS, Footman

LADY HUNSTANTON
LADY CAROLINE PONTEFRACT
LADY STUTFIELD
MRS. ALLONBY
MISS HESTER WORSLEY
ALICE, Maid
MRS. ARBUTHNOT

THE SCENES OF THE PLAY.

ACT I *The Terrace at Hunstanton Chase.*

ACT II *The Drawing-room at Hunstanton Chase.*

ACT III *The Hall at Hunstanton Chase.*

ACT IV *Sitting-room in Mrs. Arbuthnot's House at Wrockley.*

Time

The Present.

Place

The Shires.

The action of the play takes place within twenty-four hours.

FIRST ACT

SCENE—*Lawn in front of the terrace at Hunstanton.*

[*Sir John and Lady Caroline Pontefract, Miss Worsley, on chairs under large yew tree.*]

LADY CAROLINE

I believe this is the first English country house you have stayed at, Miss Worsley?

HESTER

Yes, Lady Caroline.

LADY CAROLINE

You have no country houses, I am told, in America?

HESTER

We have not many.

LADY CAROLINE

Have you any country? What we should call country?

HESTER

[*Smiling.*] We have the largest country in the world, Lady Caroline. They used to tell us at school that some of our states are as big as France and England put together.

LADY CAROLINE

Ah! you must find it very draughty, I should fancy. [*To Sir John.*] John, you should have your muffler. What is the use of my always knitting mufflers for you if you won't wear them?

SIR JOHN

I am quite warm, I assure you.

LADY CAROLINE

I think not, John. Well, you couldn't come to a more charming place than this, Miss Worsley, though the house is excessively damp, quite unpardonably damp, and dear Lady Hunstanton is sometimes a little lax about the people she asks down here. [*To Sir John.*] Jane mixes too much. Lord Illingworth, of course, is a man of high distinction. It is a privilege to meet him. And that member of Parliament, Mr. Kettle——

SIR JOHN

Kelvil, my love, Kelvil.

LADY CAROLINE

He must be quite respectable. One has never heard his name before in the whole course of one's life, which speaks volumes for a man, now-a-days. But Mrs. Allonby is hardly a very suitable person.

HESTER

I dislike Mrs. Allonby. I dislike her more than I can say.

LADY CAROLINE

I am not sure, Miss Worsley, that foreigners like yourself should cultivate likes or dislikes about the people they are invited to meet. Mrs. Allonby is very well born. She is a niece of Lord Brancaster's. It is said, of course, that she ran away twice before she was married. But you know how unfair people often are. I myself don't believe she ran away more than once.

HESTER

Mr. Arbuthnot is very charming.

LADY CAROLINE

Ah, yes! the young man who has a post in a bank. Lady Hunstanton is most kind in asking him here, and Lord Illingworth seems to have taken quite a fancy to him. I am not sure, however, that Jane is right in taking him out of his position. In my young days, Miss Worsley, one never met anyone in society who worked for their living. It was not considered the thing.

HESTER

In America those are the people we respect most.

LADY CAROLINE

I have no doubt of it.

HESTER

Mr. Arbuthnot has a beautiful nature! He is so simple, so sincere. He has one of the most beautiful natures I have ever come across. It is a privilege to meet *him*.

LADY CAROLINE

It is not customary in England, Miss Worsley, for a young lady to speak with such enthusiasm of any person of the opposite sex. Eng-

lish women conceal their feelings till after they are married. They show them then.

HESTER

Do you, in England, allow no friendship to exist between a young man and a young girl?

[*Enter Lady Hunstanton followed by Footman with shawls and a cushion.*]

LADY CAROLINE

We think it very inadvisable. Jane, I was just saying what a pleasant party you have asked us to meet. You have a wonderful power of selection. It is quite a gift.

LADY HUNSTANTON

Dear Caroline, how kind of you! I think we all do fit in very nicely together. And I hope our charming American visitor will carry back pleasant recollections of our English country life. [*To Footman.*] The cushion there, Francis. And my shawl. The Shetland. Get the Shetland. [*Exit Footman for Shawl..*]

[*Enter Gerald Arbuthnot.*]

GERALD

Lady Hunstanton, I have such good news to

tell you. Lord Illingworth has just offered to make me his secretary.

LADY HUNSTANTON

His secretary! That is good news indeed, Gerald. It means a very brilliant future in store for you. Your dear mother will be delighted. I really must try and induce her to come up here to-night. Do you think she would, Gerald? I know how difficult it is to get her to go anywhere.

GERALD

Oh! I am sure she would, Lady Hunstanton, if she knew Lord Illingworth had made me such an offer.

[Enter Footman with shawl.]

LADY HUNSTANTON

I will write and tell her about it, and ask her to come up and meet him. *[To Footman.]* Just wait, Francis. *[Exit Footman.]*

LADY CAROLINE

That is a very wonderful opening for so young a man as you are, Mr. Arbuthnot.

GERALD

It is indeed, Lady Caroline. I trust I shall be able to show myself worthy of it.

LADY CAROLINE

I trust so.

GERALD

[*To Hester.*] *You* have not congratulated me yet, Miss Worsley.

HESTER

Are you very pleased about it?

GERALD

Of course I am. It means everything to me—things that were out of the reach of hope before may be within hope's reach now.

HESTER

Nothing should be out of the reach of hope. Life is a hope.

LADY HUNSTANTON

I fancy, Caroline, that Diplomacy is what Lord Illingworth is aiming at. I heard that he was offered Vienna. But that may not be true.

LADY CAROLINE

I don't think that England should be represented abroad by an unmarried man, Jane. It might lead to complications.

LADY HUNSTANTON

You are too nervous, Caroline. Believe me, you are too nervous. Besides, Lord Illingworth may marry any day. I was in hopes he would have married Lady Kelso. But I believe he said her family was too large. Or was it her feet? I forget which. I regret it very much. She was made to be an ambassador's wife.

LADY CAROLINE

She certainly has a wonderful faculty of remembering people's names, and forgetting their faces.

LADY HUNSTANTON

Well, that is very natural, Caroline, is it not? [*To Footman.*] Tell Henry to wait for an answer. I have written a line to your dear mother, Gerald, to tell her your good news, and to say she really must come to dinner.

[*Exit Footman.*]

GERALD

That is awfully kind of you, Lady Hunstanton. [*To Hester.*] Will you come for a stroll, Miss Worsley?

HESTER

With pleasure. [*Exit with Gerald.*]

LADY HUNSTANTON

I am very much gratified at Gerald Arbuthnot's good fortune. He is quite a *protégé* of mine. And I am particularly pleased that Lord Illingworth should have made the offer of his own accord without my suggesting anything. Nobody likes to be asked favours. I remember poor Charlotte Pagden making herself quite unpopular one season, because she had a French governess she wanted to recommend to every one.

LADY CAROLINE

I saw the governess, Jane. Lady Pagden sent her to me. It was before Eleanor came out. She was far too good-looking to be in any respectable household. I don't wonder Lady Pagden was so anxious to get rid of her.

LADY HUNSTANTON

Ah, that explains it.

LADY CAROLINE

John, the grass is too damp for you. You had better go and put on your overshoes at once.

SIR JOHN

I am quite comfortable, Caroline, I assure you.

LADY CAROLINE

You must allow me to be the best judge of that, John. Pray, do as I tell you.

[*Sir John gets up and goes off.*]

LADY HUNSTANTON

You spoil him, Caroline, you do, indeed.

[*Enter Mrs. Allonby and Lady Stutfield.*]

[*To Mrs. Allonby.*] Well, dear, I hope you like the park. It is said to be well timbered.

MRS. ALLONBY

The trees are wonderful, Lady Hunstanton.

LADY STUTFIELD

Quite, quite wonderful.

MRS. ALLONBY

But somehow, I feel sure that if I lived in the country for six months, I should become so unsophisticated that no one would take the slightest notice of me.

LADY HUNSTANTON

I assure you, dear, that the country has not that effect at all. Why, it was from Melthorpe, which is only two miles from here, that Lady Belton eloped with Lord Fethersdale. I remember the occurrence perfectly. Poor Lord Belton died three days afterwards of joy or gout. I forget which. We had a large party staying here at the time, so we were all very much interested in the whole affair.

MRS. ALLONBY

I think to elope is cowardly. It's running away from danger. And danger has become so rare in modern life.

LADY CAROLINE

As far as I can make out, the young women of the present day seem to make it the sole object of their lives to be always playing with fire.

MRS. ALLONBY

The one advantage of playing with fire, Lady Caroline, is that one never gets even singed. It is the people who don't know how to play with it who get burned up.

LADY STUTFIELD

Yes; I see that. It is very, very helpful.

LADY HUNSTANTON

I don't know how the world would get on with such a theory as that, dear Mrs. Allonby.

LADY STUTFIELD

Ah! The world was made for men and not for women.

MRS. ALLONBY

Oh, don't say that, Lady Stutfield. We have a much better time than they have. There are far more things forbidden to us than are forbidden to them.

LADY STUTFIELD

Yes; that is quite, quite true. I had not thought of that.

[*Enter Sir John and Mr. Kelvil.*]

LADY HUNSTANTON

Well, Mr. Kelvil, have you got through your work?

KELVIL

I have finished my writing for the day, Lady Hunstanton. It has been an arduous task. The demands on the time of a public man are very heavy now-a-days, very heavy indeed. And I don't think they meet with adequate recognition.

LADY CAROLINE

John, have you got your overshoes on?

SIR JOHN

Yes, my love.

LADY CAROLINE

I think you had better come over here, John. It is more sheltered.

SIR JOHN

I am quite comfortable, Caroline.

LADY CAROLINE

I think not, John. You had better sit beside me. [*Sir John rises and goes across.*]

LADY STUTFIELD

And what have you been writing about this morning, Mr. Kelvil?

KELVIL

On the usual subject, Lady Stutfield. On Purity.

LADY STUTFIELD

That must be such a very, very interesting thing to write about.

KELVIL

It is the one subject of really national importance, now-a-days, Lady Stutfield. I purpose addressing my constituents on the question before Parliament meets. I find that the poorer classes of this country display a marked desire for a higher ethical standard.

LADY STUTFIELD

How quite, quite nice of them.

LADY CAROLINE

Are you in favour of women taking part in politics, Mr. Kettle?

SIR JOHN

Kelvil, my love, Kelvil.

KELVIL

The growing influence of women is the one reassuring thing in our political life, Lady Caroline. Women are always on the side of morality, public and private.

LADY STUTFIELD

It is so very, very gratifying to hear you say that.

LADY HUNSTANTON

Ah, yes! the moral qualities in women—that is the important thing. I am afraid, Caroline, that dear Lord Illingworth doesn't value the moral qualities in women as much as he should.

[*Enter Lord Illingworth.*]

LADY STUTFIELD

The world says that Lord Illingworth is very, very wicked.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

But what world says that, Lady Stutfield? It must be the next world. This world and I

are on excellent terms. [*Sits down beside Mrs. Allonby.*]

LADY STUTFIELD

Every one *I* know says you are very, very wicked.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

It is perfectly monstrous the way people go about, now-a-days, saying things against one behind one's back that are absolutely and entirely true.

LADY HUNSTANTON

Dear Lord Illingworth is quite hopeless, Lady Stutfield. I have given up trying to reform him. It would take a Public Company with a Board of Directors and a paid Secretary to do that. But you have the secretary already, Lord Illingworth, haven't you? Gerald Arbuthnot has told us of his good fortune; it is really most kind of you.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Oh, don't say that, Lady Hunstanton. Kind is a dreadful word. I took a great fancy to young Arbuthnot the moment I met him, and

he'll be of considerable use to me in something I am foolish enough to think of doing.

LADY HUNSTANTON

He is an admirable young man. And his mother is one of my dearest friends. He has just gone for a walk with our pretty American. She is very pretty, is she not?

LADY CAROLINE

Far too pretty. These American girls carry off all the good matches. Why can't they stay in their own country? They are always telling us it is the Paradise of women.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

It is, Lady Caroline. That is why, like Eve, they are so extremely anxious to get out of it.

LADY CAROLINE

Who are Miss Worsley's parents?

LORD ILLINGWORTH

American women are wonderfully clever in concealing their parents.

LADY HUNSTANTON

My dear Lord Illingworth, what do you mean? Miss Worsley, Caroline, is an orphan.

Her father was a very wealthy millionaire, or philanthropist, or both, I believe, who entertained my son quite hospitably, when he visited Boston. I don't know how he made his money, originally.

KELVIL

I fancy in American dry goods.

LADY HUNSTANTON

What are American dry goods?

LORD ILLINGWORTH

American novels.

LADY HUNSTANTON

How very singular! . . . Well, from whatever source her large fortune came, I have a great esteem for Miss Worsley. She dresses exceedingly well. All Americans do dress well. They get their clothes in Paris.

MRS. ALLONBY

They say, Lady Hunstanton, that when good Americans die they go to Paris.

LADY HUNSTANTON

Indeed? And when bad Americans die where do they go to?

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Oh, they go to America.

KELVIL

I am afraid you don't appreciate America, Lord Illingworth. It is a very remarkable country, especially considering its youth.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

The youth of America is their oldest tradition. It has been going on now for three hundred years. To hear them talk one would imagine they were in their first childhood. As far as civilisation goes they are in their second.

KELVIL

There is undoubtedly a great deal of corruption in American politics. I suppose you allude to that?

LORD ILLINGWORTH

I wonder.

LADY HUNSTANTON

Politics are in a very sad way everywhere, I am told. They certainly are in England. Dear Mr. Cardew is ruining the country. I wonder Mrs. Cardew allows him. I am sure, Lord Illing-

worth, you don't think that uneducated people should be allowed to have votes?

LORD ILLINGWORTH

I think they are the only people who should.

KELVIL

Do you take no side then in modern politics, Lord Illingworth?

LORD ILLINGWORTH

One should never take sides in anything, Mr. Kelvil. Taking sides is the beginning of sincerity, and earnestness follows shortly afterwards, and the human being becomes a bore. However, the House of Commons really does very little harm. You can't make people good by Act of Parliament,—that is something.

KELVIL

You cannot deny that the House of Commons has always shown great sympathy with the sufferings of the poor.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

That is its special vice. That is the special vice of the age. One should sympathise with

the joy, the beauty, the colour of life. The less said about life's sores the better, Mr. Kelvil.

KELVIL

Still our East End is a very important problem.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Quite so. It is the problem of slavery. And we are trying to solve it by amusing the slaves.

LADY HUNSTANTON

Certainly, a great deal may be done by means of cheap entertainments, as you say, Lord Illingworth. Dear Dr. Daubeny, our rector here, provides with the assistance of his curates, really admirable recreations for the poor during the winter. And much good may be done by means of a magic lantern, or a missionary, or some popular amusement of that kind.

LADY CAROLINE

I am not at all in favour of amusements for the poor, Jane. Blankets and coals are sufficient. There is too much love of pleasure amongst the upper classes as it is. Health is what we want in modern life. The tone is not healthy, not healthy at all.

KELVIL

You are quite right, Lady Caroline.

LADY CAROLINE

I believe I am usually right.

MRS. ALLONBY

Horrid word "health."

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Silliest word in our language, and one knows so well the popular idea of health. The English country gentleman galloping after a fox—the unspeakable in full pursuit of the uneatable.

KELVIL

May I ask, Lord Illingworth, if you regard the House of Lords as a better institution than the House of Commons?

LORD ILLINGWORTH

A much better institution, of course. We in the House of Lords are never in touch with public opinion. That makes us a civilised body.

KELVIL

Are you serious in putting forward such a view?

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Quite serious, Mr. Kelvil. [*To Mrs. Allonby.*] Vulgar habit that is people have now-a-days of asking one, after one has given them an idea, whether one is serious or not. Nothing is serious except passion. The intellect is not a serious thing, and never has been. It is an instrument on which one plays, that is all. The only serious form of intellect I know is the British intellect. And on the British intellect the illiterates play the drum.

LADY HUNSTANTON

What are you saying, Lord Illingworth, about the drum?

LORD ILLINGWORTH

I was merely talking to Mrs. Allonby about the leading articles in the London newspapers.

LADY HUNSTANTON

But do you believe all that is written in the newspapers?

LORD ILLINGWORTH

I do. Now-a-days it is only the unreadable that occurs. [*Rises with Mrs. Allonby.*]

LADY HUNSTANTON

Are you going, Mrs. Allonby?

MRS. ALLONBY

Just as far as the conservatory. Lord Illingworth told me this morning that there was an orchid there as beautiful as the seven deadly sins.

LADY HUNSTANTON

My dear, I hope there is nothing of the kind. I will certainly speak to the gardener.

[*Exit Mrs. Allonby and Lord Illingworth.*]

LADY CAROLINE

Remarkable type, Mrs. Allonby.

LADY HUNSTANTON

She lets her clever tongue run away with her sometimes.

LADY CAROLINE

Is that the only thing, Jane, Mrs. Allonby allows to run away with her?

LADY HUNSTANTON

I hope so, Caroline, I am sure.

[*Enter Lord Alfred.*]

Dear Lord Alfred, do join us. [*Lord Alfred sits down beside Lady Stutfield.*]

LADY CAROLINE

You believe good of every one, Jane. It is a great fault.

LADY STUTFIELD

Do you really, really think, Lady Caroline, that one should believe evil of every one?

LADY CAROLINE

I think it is much safer to do so, Lady Stutfield. Until, of course, people are found out to be good. But that requires a great deal of investigation, now-a-days.

LADY STUTFIELD

But there is so much unkind scandal in modern life.

LADY CAROLINE

Lord Illingworth remarked to me last night at dinner that the basis of every scandal is an absolutely immoral certainty.

KELVIL

Lord Illingworth is, of course, a very brilliant

man, but he seems to me to be lacking in that fine faith in the nobility and purity of life which is so important in this country.

LADY STUTFIELD

Yes, quite, quite important, is it not?

KELVIL

He gives me the impression of a man who does not appreciate the beauty of our English home-life. I would say that he was tainted with foreign ideas on the subject.

LADY STUTFIELD

There is nothing, nothing like the beauty of home-life, is there?

KELVIL

It is the mainstay of our moral system in England, Lady Stutfield. Without it we would become like our neighbours.

LADY STUTFIELD

That would be so, so sad, would it not?

KELVIL

I am afraid, too, that Lord Illingworth regards woman simply as a toy. Now, I have never regarded woman as a toy. Woman is the

intellectual helpmeet of man in public as in private life. Without her we should forget the true ideals. [*Sits down beside Lady Stutfield.*]

LADY STUTFIELD

I am so very, very glad to hear you say that.

LADY CAROLINE

You a married man, Mr. Kettle?

SIR JOHN

Kelvil, dear, Kelvil.

KELVIL

I am married, Lady Caroline.

LADY CAROLINE

Family?

KELVIL

Yes.

LADY CAROLINE

How many?

KELVIL

Eight.

[*Lady Stutfield turns her attention to Lord Alfred.*]

LADY CAROLINE

Mrs. Kettle and the children are, I suppose, at the seaside? [*Sir John shrugs his shoulders.*]

KELVIL

My wife is at the seaside with the children, Lady Caroline.

LADY CAROLINE

You will join them later on, no doubt?

KELVIL

If my public engagements permit me.

LADY CAROLINE

Your public life must be a great source of gratification to Mrs. Kettle.

SIR JOHN

Kelvil, my love, Kelvil.

LADY STUTFIELD

[*To Lord Alfred.*] How very, very charming those gold-tipped cigarettes of yours are, Lord Alfred.

LORD ALFRED

They are awfully expensive. I can only afford them when I'm in debt.

LADY STUTFIELD

It must be terribly, terribly distressing to be in debt.

LORD ALFRED

One must have some occupation now-a-days. If I hadn't my debts I shouldn't have anything to think about. All the chaps I know are in debt.

LADY STUTFIELD

But don't the people to whom you owe the money give you a great, great deal of annoyance?

[*Enter Footman.*]

LORD ALFRED

Oh, no, they write; I don't.

LADY STUTFIELD

How very, very strange.

LADY HUNSTANTON

Ah, here is a letter, Caroline, from dear Mrs. Arbuthnot. She won't dine. I am so sorry.

But she will come in the evening. I am very pleased indeed. She is one of the sweetest of women. Writes a beautiful hand too, so large, so firm. [*Hands letter to Lady Caroline.*]

LADY STUTFIELD

[*Looking at it.*] A little lacking in femininity, Jane. Femininity is the quality I admire most in women.

LADY HUNSTANTON

[*Taking back letter and leaving it on table.*] Oh! she is very feminine, Caroline, and so good too. You should hear what the Archdeacon says of her. He regards her as his right hand in the parish. [*Footman speaks to her.*] In the Yellow Drawing-room. Shall we all go in? Lady Stutfield, shall we go in to tea?

LADY STUTFIELD

With pleasure, Lady Hunstanton. [*They rise and proceed to go off. Sir John offers to carry Lady Stutfield's cloak.*]

LADY CAROLINE

John! If you would allow your nephew to

look after Lady Stutfield's cloak, you might help me with my workbasket.

[*Enter Lord Illingworth and Mrs. Allonby.*]

SIR JOHN

Certainly my love. [*Exeunt.*]

MRS. ALLONBY

Curious thing, plain women are always jealous of their husbands, beautiful women never are!

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Beautiful women never have time. They are always so occupied in being jealous of other people's husbands.

MRS. ALLONBY

I should have thought Lady Caroline would have grown tired of conjugal anxiety by this time! Sir John is her fourth!

LORD ILLINGWORTH

So much marriage is certainly not becoming. Twenty years of romance make a woman look like a ruin; but twenty years of marriage make her something like a public building.

MRS. ALLONBY

Twenty years of romance! Is there such a thing?

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Not in our day. Women have become too brilliant. Nothing spoils a romance so much as a sense of humour in the woman.

MRS. ALLONBY

Or the want of it in the man.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

You are quite right. In a Temple every one should be serious, except the thing that is worshipped.

MRS. ALLONBY

And that should be man?

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Women kneel so gracefully; men don't.

MRS. ALLONBY

You are thinking of Lady Stutfield!

LORD ILLINGWORTH

I assure you I have not thought of Lady Stutfield for the last quarter of an hour.

MRS. ALLONBY

Is she such a mystery?

LORD ILLINGWORTH.

She is more than a mystery—she is a mood.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Moods don't last.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

It is their chief charm.

[*Enter Hester and Gerald.*]

GERALD

Lord Illingworth, every one has been congratulating me, Lady Hunstanton and Lady Caroline, and . . . every one. I hope I shall make a good secretary.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

You will be the pattern secretary, Gerald. [*Talks to him.*]

MRS. ALLONBY

You enjoy country life, Miss Worsley?

HESTER

Very much indeed.

MRS. ALLONBY

Don't find yourself longing for a London dinner-party?

HESTER

I dislike London dinner-parties.

MRS. ALLONBY

I adore them. The clever people never listen, and the stupid people never talk.

HESTER

I think the stupid people talk a great deal.

MRS. ALLONBY

Ah, I never listen!

LORD ILLINGWORTH

My dear boy, if I didn't like you I wouldn't have made you the offer. It is because I like you so much that I want to have you with me.

[*Exit Hester with Gerald.*]

Charming fellow, Gerald Arbuthnot!

MRS. ALLONBY

He is very nice; very nice indeed. But I can't stand the American young lady.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Why?

MRS. ALLONBY

She told me yesterday, and in quite a loud

voice too, that she was only eighteen. It was most annoying.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

One should never trust a woman who tells one her real age. A woman who would tell one that would tell one anything.

MRS. ALLONBY

She is a Puritan besides——

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Ah, that is inexcusable. I don't mind plain women being Puritans. It is the only excuse they have for being plain. But she is decidedly pretty. I admire her immensely. [*Looks stedfastly at Mrs. Allonby.*]

MRS. ALLONBY

What a thoroughly bad man you must be!

LORD ILLINGWORTH

What do you call a bad man?

MRS. ALLONBY

The sort of man who admires innocence.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

And a bad woman?

MRS. ALLONBY

Oh! the sort of woman a man never gets tired of.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

You are severe—on yourself.

MRS. ALLONBY

Define us as a sex.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Sphinxes without secrets.

MRS. ALLONBY

Does that include the Puritan women?

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Do you know, I don't believe in the existence of Puritan women? I don't think there is a woman in the world would not be a little flattered if one made love to her. It is that which makes women so irresistibly adorable.

MRS. ALLONBY

You think there is no woman in the world who would object to being kissed?

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Very few.

MRS. ALLONBY

Miss Worsley would not let you kiss her.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Are you sure?

MRS. ALLONBY

Quite.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

What do you think she'd do if I kissed her?

MRS. ALLONBY

Either marry you, or strike you across the face with her glove. What would you do if she struck you across the face with her glove?

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Fall in love with her, probably.

MRS. ALLONBY

Then it is lucky you are not going to kiss her!

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Is that a challenge?

MRS. ALLONBY

It is an arrow shot into the air.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Don't you know that I always succeed in whatever I try?

MRS. ALLONBY

I am sorry to hear it. We women adore failures. They lean on us.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

You worship successes. You cling to them.

MRS. ALLONBY

We are the laurels to hide their baldness.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

And they need you always, except at the moment of triumph.

MRS. ALLONBY

They are uninteresting then.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

How tantalising you are! [*A pause.*]

MRS. ALLONBY

Lord Illingworth, there is one thing I shall always like you for.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Only one thing? And I have so many bad qualities.

MRS. ALLONBY

Ah, don't be too conceited about them. You may lose them as you grow old.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

I never intend to grow old. The soul is born old but grows young. That is the comedy of life.

MRS. ALLONBY

And the body is born young and grows old. That is life's tragedy.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Its comedy also, sometimes. But what is the mysterious reason why you will always like me?

MRS. ALLONBY

It is that you have never made love to me.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

I have never done anything else.

MRS. ALLONBY

Really? I have not noticed it.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

How fortunate! It might have been a tragedy for both of us.

MRS. ALLONBY

We should each have survived.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

One can survive everything now-a-days, except death, and live down anything except a good reputation.

MRS. ALLONBY

Have you tried a good reputation?

LORD ILLINGWORTH

It is one of the many annoyances to which I have never been subjected.

MRS. ALLONBY

It may come.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Why do you threaten me?

MRS. ALLONBY

I will tell you when you have kissed the Puritan.

[*Enter Footman.*]

FRANCIS

Tea is served in the Yellow Drawing-room, my lord.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Tell her ladyship we are coming in. [*Exit.*]

FRANCIS

Yes, my lord.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Shall we go in to tea?

MRS. ALLONBY

Do you like such simple pleasures?

LORD ILLINGWORTH

I adore simple pleasures. They are the last refuge of the complex. But, if you wish, let us stay here. Yes, let us stay here. The Book of Life begins with a man and a woman in a garden.

MRS. ALLONBY

It ends with Revelations.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

You fence divinely. But the button has come off your foil.

MRS. ALLONBY

I have still the mask.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

It makes your eyes lovelier.

MRS. ALLONBY

Thank you. Come.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

[*Sees Mrs. Arbuthnot's letter on table, and takes it up and looks at envelope.*] What a curious handwriting! It reminds me of the handwriting of a woman I used to know years ago.

MRS. ALLONBY

Who?

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Oh! no one. No one in particular. A woman of no importance. [*Throws letter down, and passes up the steps of the terrace with Mrs. Allonby. They smile at each other.*]

ACT-DROP.

SECOND ACT.

SCENE—*Drawing-room at Hunstanton, after dinner, lamps lit. Door I.C. Door R.C.*

[*Ladies seated on sofas.*]

MRS. ALLONBY

What a comfort it is to have got rid of the men for a little!

LADY STUTFIELD

Yes; men persecute us dreadfully, don't they?

MRS. ALLONBY

Persecute us? I wish they did.

LADY HUNSTANTON

My dear!

MRS. ALLONBY

The annoying thing is that the wretches can be perfectly happy without us. That is why I

think it is every woman's duty never to leave them alone for a single moment, except during this short breathing space after dinner; without which I believe we poor women would be absolutely worn to shadows.

[*Enter Servants with coffee.*]

LADY HUNSTANTON

Worn to shadows, dear?

MRS. ALLONBY

Yes, Lady Hunstanton. It is such a strain keeping men up to the mark. They are always trying to escape from us.

LADY STUTFIELD

It seems to me that it is we who are always trying to escape from them. Men are so very, very heartless. They know their power and use it.

LADY CAROLINE

[*Takes coffee from Servant.*] What stuff and nonsense all this about men is! The thing to do is to keep men in their proper place.

MRS. ALLONBY

But what is their proper place, Lady Caroline?

LADY CAROLINE

Looking after their wives, Mrs. Allonby.

MRS. ALLONBY

[*Takes coffee from Servant.*] Really? And if they're not married?

LADY CAROLINE

If they are not married, they should be looking after a wife. It's perfectly scandalous the amount of bachelors who are going about society. There should be a law passed to compel them all to marry within twelve months.

LADY STUTFIELD

[*Refuses coffee.*] But if they're in love with some one who, perhaps, is tied to another?

LADY CAROLINE

In that case, Lady Stutfield, they should be married off in a week to some plain respectable girl, in order to teach them not to meddle with other people's property.

MRS. ALLONBY

I don't think that we should ever be spoken of as other people's property. All men are married women's property. That is the only true definition of what married women's property really is. But we don't belong to any one.

LADY STUTFIELD

Oh, I am so very, very glad to hear you say so.

LADY HUNSTANTON

But do you really think, dear Caroline, that legislation would improve matters in any way? I am told that, now-a-days, all the married men live like bachelors, and all the bachelors like married men.

MRS. ALLONBY

I certainly never know one from the other.

LADY STUTFIELD

Oh, I think one can always know at once whether a man has home claims upon his life or not. I have noticed a very, very sad expression in the eyes of so many married men.

MRS. ALLONBY

Ah, all that I have noticed is that they are horribly tedious when they are good husbands, and abominably conceited when they are not.

LADY HUNSTANTON

Well, I suppose the type of husband has completely changed since my young days, but I'm bound to state that poor dear Hunstanton was the most delightful of creatures, and as good as gold.

MRS. ALLONBY

Ah, my husband is a sort of promissory note; I am tired of meeting him.

LADY CAROLINE

But you renew him from time to time, don't you?

MRS. ALLONBY

Oh, no, lady Caroline. I have only had one husband as yet. I suppose you look upon me as quite an amateur.

LADY CAROLINE

With your views on life I wonder you married at all.

MRS. ALLONBY

So do I.

LADY HUNSTANTON

My dear child, I believe you are really very happy in your married life, but that you like to hide your happiness from others.

MRS. ALLONBY

I assure you I was horribly deceived in Ernest.

LADY HUNSTANTON

Oh, I hope not, dear. I knew his mother quite well. She was a Stratton, Caroline, one of Lord Crowland's daughters.

LADY CAROLINE

Victoria Stratton? I remember her perfectly. A silly fair-haired woman with no chin.

MRS. ALLONBY

Ah, Ernest has a chin. He has a very strong chin, a square chin. Ernest's chin is far too square.

LADY STUTFIELD

But do you really think a man's chin can be too square? I think a man should look very, very strong, and that his chin should be quite, quite square.

MRS. ALLONBY

Then you should certainly know Ernest, Lady Stutfield. It is only fair to tell you beforehand he has got no conversation at all.

LADY STUTFIELD

I adore silent men.

MRS. ALLONBY

Oh, Ernest isn't silent. He talks the whole time. But he has got no conversation. What he talks about I don't know. I haven't listened to him for years.

LADY STUTFIELD

Have you never forgiven him then? How sad that seems! But all life is very, very sad, is it not?

MRS. ALLONBY

Life, Lady Stutfield, is simply a *mauvais quart d'heure* made up of exquisite moments.

LADY STUTFIELD

Yes, there are moments, certainly. But was it something very, very wrong that Mr. Allonby did? Did he become angry with you, and say anything that was unkind or true?

MRS. ALLONBY

Oh dear, no. Ernest is invariably calm. That is one of the reasons he always gets on my nerves. Nothing is so aggravating as calmness. There is something positively brutal about the good temper of most modern men. I wonder we women stand it as well as we do.

LADY STUTFIELD

Yes; men's good temper shows they are not so sensitive as we are, not so finely strung. It makes a great barrier often between husband and wife, does it not? But I would so much like to know what was the wrong thing Mr. Allonby did.

MRS. ALLONBY

Well, I will tell you, if you solemnly promise to tell everybody else.

LADY STUTFIELD

Thank you, thank you. I will make a point of repeating it.

MRS. ALLONBY

When Ernest and I were engaged he swore to me positively on his knees that he never had loved any one before in the whole course of his life. I was very young at the time, so I didn't believe him, I needn't tell you. Unfortunately, however, I made no enquiries of any kind till after I had been actually married four or five months. I found out then that what he had told me was perfectly true. And that sort of thing makes a man so absolutely uninteresting.

LADY HUNSTANTON

My dear!

MRS. ALLONBY

Men always want to be a woman's first love. That is their clumsy vanity. We women have a more subtle instinct about things. What we like is to be a man's last romance.

LADY STUTFIELD

I see what you mean. It's very, very beautiful.

LADY HUNSTANTON

My dear child, you don't mean to tell me that you won't forgive your husband because he never loved any one else? Did you ever hear such a thing, Caroline? I am quite surprised.

LADY CAROLINE

Oh, women have become so highly educated, Jane, that nothing should surprise us now-a-days, except happy marriages. They apparently are getting remarkably rare.

MRS. ALLONBY

Oh, they're quite out of date.

LADY STUTFIELD

Except amongst the middle classes, I have been told.

MRS. ALLONBY

How like the middle classes!

LADY STUTFIELD

Yes—is it not?—very, very like them.

LADY CAROLINE

If what you tell us about the middle classes is true, Lady Stutfield, it redounds greatly to

their credit. It is much to be regretted that in our rank of life the wife should be so persistently frivolous, under the impression apparently that it is the proper thing to be. It is to that I attribute the unhappiness of so many marriages we all know of in society.

MRS. ALLONBY

Do you know, Lady Caroline, I don't think the frivolity of the wife has ever anything to do with it. More marriages are ruined now-a-days by the common sense of the husband than by anything else. How can a woman be expected to be happy with a man who insists on treating her as if she were a perfectly rational being?

LADY HUNSTANTON

My dear!

MRS. ALLONBY

Man, poor, awkward, reliable, necessary man belongs to a sex that has been rational for millions and millions of years. He can't help himself. It is in his race. The History of Woman is very different. We have always been picturesque protests against the mere existence of

common sense. We saw its dangers from the first.

LADY STUTFIELD

Yes, the common sense of husbands is certainly most, most trying. Do tell me your conception of the Ideal Husband. I think it would be so very, very helpful.

MRS. ALLONBY

The Ideal Husband? There couldn't be such a thing. The institution is wrong.

LADY STUTFIELD

The Ideal Man, then, in his relations to *us*.

LADY CAROLINE

He would probably be extremely realistic.

MRS. ALLONBY

The Ideal Man! Oh, the Ideal Man should talk to us as if we were goddesses, and treat us as if we were children. He should refuse all our serious requests, and gratify every one of our whims. He should encourage us to have caprices, and forbid us to have missions. He should always say much more than he means, and always mean much more than he says.

LADY HUNSTANTON

But how could he do both, dear?

MRS. ALLONBY

He should never run down other pretty women. That would show he had no taste, or make one suspect that he had too much. No; he should be nice about them all, but say that somehow they don't attract him.

LADY STUTFIELD

Yes, that is always very, very pleasant to hear about other women.

MRS. ALLONBY

If we ask him a question about anything, he should give us an answer all about ourselves. He should invariably praise us for whatever qualities he knows we haven't got. But he should be pitiless, quite pitiless, in reproaching us for the virtues that we have never dreamed of possessing. He should never believe that we know the use of useful things. That would be unforgiveable. But he should shower on us everything we don't want.

LADY CAROLINE

As far as I can see, he is to do nothing but pay bills and compliments.

MRS. ALLONBY

He should persistently compromise us in public, and treat us with absolute respect when we are alone. And yet he should be always ready to have a perfectly terrible scene, whenever we want one, and to become miserable, absolutely miserable, at a moment's notice, and to overwhelm us with just reproaches in less than twenty minutes, and to be positively violent at the end of half an hour, and to leave us for ever at a quarter to eight, when we have to go and dress for dinner. And when, after that, one has seen him for really the last time, and he has refused to take back the little things he has given one, and promised never to communicate with one again, or to write one any foolish letters, he should be perfectly broken-hearted, and telegraph to one all day long, and send one little notes every half-hour by a private hansom, and dine quite alone at the club, so that every one should know how unhappy he was. And after

a whole dreadful week, during which one has gone about everywhere with one's husband, just to show how absolutely lonely one was, he may be given a third last parting, in the evening, and then, if his conduct has been quite irreproachable, and one has behaved really badly to him, he should be allowed to admit that he has been entirely in the wrong, and when he has admitted that, it becomes a woman's duty to forgive, and one can do it all over again from the beginning, with variations.

LADY HUNSTANTON

How clever you are, my dear! You never mean a single word you say.

LADY STUTFIELD

Thank you, thank you. It has been quite, quite entrancing. I must try and remember it all. There are such a number of details that are so very, very important.

LADY CAROLINE

But you have not told us yet what the reward of the Ideal Man is to be.

MRS. ALLONBY

His reward? Oh, infinite expectation. That is quite enough for him.

LADY STUTFIELD

But men are so terribly, terribly exacting, are they not?

MRS. ALLONBY

That makes no matter. One should never surrender.

LADY STUTFIELD

Not even to the Ideal Man?

MRS. ALLONBY

Certainly not to him. Unless, of course, one wants to grow tired of him.

LADY STUTFIELD

Oh! . . . yes. I see that. It is very, very helpful. Do you think, Mrs. Allonby, I shall ever meet the Ideal Man? Or are there more than one?

MRS. ALLONBY

There are just four in London, Lady Stutfield.

LADY HUNSTANTON

Oh, my dear!

MRS. ALLONBY [*Going over to her.*]

What has happened? Do tell me.

LADY HUNSTANTON [*in a low voice.*]

I had completely forgotten that the American young lady has been in the room all the time. I am afraid some of this clever talk may have shocked her a little.

MRS. ALLONBY

Ah, that will do her so much good!

LADY HUNSTANTON

Let us hope she didn't understand much. I think I had better go over and talk to her. [*Rises and goes across to Hester Worsley.*] Well, dear Miss Worsley. [*Sitting down beside her.*] How quiet you have been in your nice little corner all this time! I suppose you have been reading a book? There are so many books here in the library.

HESTER

No, I have been listening to the conversation.

LADY HUNSTANTON

You mustn't believe everything that was said, you know, dear.

HESTER

I didn't believe any of it.

LADY HUNSTANTON

That is quite right, dear.

HESTER

[*Continuing.*] I couldn't believe that any women could really hold such views of life as I have heard to-night from some of your guests. [*An awkward pause.*]

LADY HUNSTANTON

I hear you have such pleasant society in America. Quite like our own in places, my son wrote to me.

HESTER

There are cliques in America as elsewhere, Lady Hunstanton. But true American society consists simply of all the good women and good men we have in our country.

LADY HUNSTANTON

What a sensible system, and I dare say quite

pleasant, too. I am afraid in England we have too many artificial social barriers. We don't see as much as we should of the middle and lower classes.

HESTER

In America we have no lower classes.

LADY HUNSTANTON

Really? What a very strange arrangement!

MRS. ALLONBY

What is that dreadful girl talking about?

LADY STUTFIELD

She is painfully natural, is she not?

LADY CAROLINE

There are a great many things you haven't got in America, I am told, Miss Worsley. They say you have no ruins, and no curiosities.

MRS. ALLONBY

[*To Lady Stutfield.*] What nonsense! They have their mothers and their manners.

HESTER

The English aristocracy supply us with our

curiosities, Lady Caroline. They are sent over to us every summer, regularly, in the steamers, and propose to us the day after they land. As for ruins, we are trying to build up something that will last longer than brick and stone. [*Gets up to take her fan from table.*]

LADY HUNSTANTON

What is that, dear? Ah, yes, an iron Exhibition, is it not, at that place that has the curious name?

HESTER

[*Standing by table.*] We are trying to build up life, Lady Hunstanton, on a better, truer, purer basis than life rests on here. This sounds strange to you all, no doubt. How could it sound other than strange? You rich people in England, you don't know how you are living. How could you know? You shut out from your society the gentle and the good. You laugh at the simple and the pure. Living, as you all do, on others and by them, you sneer at self-sacrifice, and if you throw bread to the poor, it is merely to keep them quiet for a season. With all your pomp and wealth and art

you don't know how to live—you don't even know that. You love the beauty that you can see and touch and handle, the beauty that you can destroy, and do destroy, but of the unseen beauty of life, of the unseen beauty of a higher life, you know nothing. You have lost life's secret. Oh, your English society seems to me shallow, selfish, foolish. It has blinded its eyes, and stopped its ears. It lies like a leper in purple. It sits like a dead thing smeared with gold. It is all wrong, all wrong.

LADY STUTFIELD

I don't think one should know of these things. It is not very, very nice, is it?

LADY HUNSTANTON

My dear Miss Worsley, I thought you liked English society so much. You were such a success in it. And you were so much admired by the best people. I quite forget what Lord Henry Weston said of you—but it was most complimentary, and you know what an authority he is on beauty.

HESTER

Lord Henry Weston! I remember him, Lady

Hunstanton. A man with a hideous smile and a hideous past. He is asked everywhere. No dinner-party is complete without him. What of those whose ruin is due to him? They are outcasts. They are nameless. If you met them in the street you would turn your head away. I don't complain of their punishment. Let all women who have sinned be punished.

[*Mrs. Arbuthnot enters from terrace behind in a cloak with a lace veil over her head. She hears the last words and starts.*]

LADY HUNSTANTON

My dear young lady!

HESTER

It is right that they should be punished, but don't let them be the only ones to suffer. If a man and woman have sinned, let them both go forth into the desert to love or loathe each other there. Let them both be branded. Set a mark, if you wish, on each, but don't punish the one and let the other go free. Don't have one law for men and another for women. You are unjust to women in England. And till you count what is a shame in a woman to be an

infamy in a man, you will always be unjust, and Right, that pillar of fire, and Wrong, that pillar of cloud, will be made dim to your eyes, or be not seen at all, or if seen, not regarded.

LADY CAROLINE

Might I, dear Miss Worsley, as you are standing up, ask you for my cotton that is just behind you? Thank you.

LADY HUNSTANTON

My dear Mrs. Arbuthnot! I am so pleased you have come up. But I didn't hear you announced.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

Oh, I came straight in from the terrace, Lady Hunstanton, just as I was. You didn't tell me you had a party.

LADY HUNSTANTON

Not a party. Only a few guests who are staying in the house, and whom you must know. Allow me. [*Tries to help her. Rings bell.*] Caroline, this is Mrs. Arbuthnot, one of my sweetest friends. Lady Caroline Pontefract, Lady Stutfield, Mrs. Allonby, and my young

American friend, Miss Worsley, who has just been telling us all how wicked we are.

HESTER

I am afraid you think I spoke too strongly, Lady Hunstanton. But there are some things in England—

LADY HUNSTANTON

My dear young lady, there was a great deal of truth, I dare say, in what you said, and you looked very pretty while you said it, which is much more important, Lord Illingworth would tell us. The only point where I thought you were a little hard was about Lady Caroline's brother, about poor Lord Henry. He is really such good company.

[*Enter Footman.*]

Take Mrs. Arbuthnot's things.

[*Exit Footman with wraps.*]

HESTER

Lady Caroline, I had no idea it was your brother. I am sorry for the pain I must have caused you—I——

LADY CAROLINE

My dear Miss Worsley, the only part of your

little speech, if I may so term it, with which I thoroughly agreed, was the part about my brother. Nothing that you could possibly say could be too bad for him. I regard Henry as infamous, absolutely infamous. But I am bound to state, as you were remarking, Jane, that he is excellent company, and he has one of the best cooks in London, and after a good dinner one can forgive anybody, even one's own relations.

LADY HUNSTANTON [*to Miss Worsley.*]

Now, do come, dear, and make friends with Mrs. Arbuthnot. She is one of the good, sweet, simple people you told us we never admitted into society. I am sorry to say Mrs. Arbuthnot comes very rarely to me. But that is not my fault.

MRS. ALLONBY

What a bore it is the men staying so long after dinner! I expect they are saying the most dreadful things about us.

LADY STUTFIELD

Do you really think so?

MRS. ALLONBY

I am sure of it.

LADY STUTFIELD

How very, very horrid of them! Shall we go on to the terrace?

MRS. ALLONBY

Oh, anything to get away from the dowagers and the dowdies. [*Rises and goes with Lady Stutfield to door L.C.*] We are only going to look at the stars, Lady Hunstanton.

LADY HUNSTANTON

You will find a great many, dear, a great many. But don't catch cold. [*To Mrs. Arbuthnot.*] We shall all miss Gerald so much, dear Mrs. Arbuthnot.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

But has Lord Illingworth really offered to make Gerald his secretary?

LADY HUNSTANTON

Oh, yes! He has been most charming about it. He has the highest possible opinion of your boy. You don't know Lord Illingworth, I believe, dear.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

I have never met him.

LADY HUNSTANTON

You know him by name, no doubt?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

I am afraid I don't. I live so much out of the world, and see so few people. I remember hearing years ago of an old Lord Illingworth who lived in Yorkshire, I think.

LADY HUNSTANTON

Ah, yes. That would be the last Earl but one. He was a very curious man. He wanted to marry beneath him. Or wouldn't, I believe. There was some scandal about it. The present Lord Illingworth is quite different. He is very distinguished. He does—well, he does nothing, which I am afraid our pretty American visitor here thinks very wrong of anybody, and I don't know that he cares much for the subjects in which you are so interested, dear Mrs. Arbuthnot. Do you think, Caroline, that Lord Illingworth is interested in the Housing of the Poor?

LADY CAROLINE

I should fancy not at all, Jane.

LADY HUNSTANTON

We all have our different tastes, have we not?

But Lord Illingworth has a very high position, and there is nothing he couldn't get if he chose to ask for it. Of course, he is comparatively a young man still, and he has only come to his title within—how long exactly is it, Caroline, since Lord Illingworth succeeded?

LADY CAROLINE

About four years, I think, Jane. I know it was the same year in which my brother had his last exposure in the evening newspapers.

LADY HUNSTANTON

Ah, I remember. That would be about four years ago. Of course, there were a great many people between the present Lord Illingworth and the title, Mrs. Arbuthnot. There was—who was there, Caroline?

LADY CAROLINE

There was poor Margaret's baby. You remember how anxious she was to have a boy, and it was a boy, but it died, and her husband died shortly afterwards, and she married almost immediately one of Lord Ascot's sons, who, I am told, beats her.

LADY HUNSTANTON

Ah, that is in the family, dear, that is in the family. And there was also, I remember, a clergyman who wanted to be a lunatic, or a lunatic who wanted to be a clergyman, I forget which, but I know the Court of Chancery investigated the matter, and decided that he was quite sane. And I saw him afterwards at poor Lord Plumstead's with straws in his hair, or something very odd about him. I can't recall what. I often regret, Lady Caroline, that dear Lady Cecilia never lived to see her son get the title.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

Lady Cecilia?

LADY HUNSTANTON

Lord Illingworth's mother, dear Mrs. Arbuthnot, was one of the Duchess of Jerningham's pretty daughters, and she married Sir Thomas Harford, who wasn't considered a very good match for her at the time, though he was said to be the handsomest man in London. I knew them all quite intimately, and both the sons, Arthur and George.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

It was the eldest son who succeeded, of course, Lady Hunstanton?

LADY HUNSTANTON

No, dear, he was killed in the hunting field. Or was it fishing, Caroline? I forget. But George came in for everything. I always tell him that no younger son has ever had such good luck as he has had.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

Lady Hunstanton, I want to speak to Gerald at once. Might I see him? Can he be sent for?

LADY HUNSTANTON

Certainly, dear. I will send one of the servants into the dining-room to fetch him. I don't know what keeps the gentlemen so long. [*Rings bell.*] When I knew Lord Illingworth first as plain George Harford, he was simply a very brilliant young man about town, with not a penny of money except what poor dear Lady Cecilia gave him. She was quite devoted to him. Chiefly, I fancy, because he was on bad terms with his father. Oh, here is the dear Archdeacon. [*To Servant.*] It doesn't matter.

[*Enter Sir John and Doctor Daubeny. Sir John goes over to Lady Siutfield, Doctor Daubeny to Lady Hunstanton.*]

THE ARCHDEACON

Lord Illingworth has been most entertaining. I have never enjoyed myself more. [*Sees Mrs. Arbuthnot.*] Ah, Mrs. Arbuthnot.

LADY HUNSTANTON

[*To Doctor Daubeny.*] You see I have got Mrs. Arbuthnot to come to me at last.

THE ARCHDEACON

That is a great honour, Lady Hunstanton. Mrs. Daubeny will be quite jealous of you.

LADY HUNSTANTON

Ah, I am so sorry Mrs. Daubeny could not come with you to-night. Headache as usual, I suppose.

THE ARCHDEACON

Yes, Lady Hunstanton; a perfect martyr. But she is happiest alone. She is happiest alone.

LADY CAROLINE

[*To her husband.*] John! [*Sir John goes over to his wife. Doctor Daubeny talks to Lady Hunstanton and Mrs. Arbuthnot.*]

[*Mrs. Arbuthnot watches Lord Illingworth the whole time. He has passed across the room without noticing her, and approaches Mrs. Allonby, who with Lady Stutfield is standing by the door looking on to the terrace.*]

LORD ILLINGWORTH

How is the most charming woman in the world?

MRS. ALLONBY

[*Taking Lady Stutfield by the hand.*] We are both quite well, thank you, Lord Illingworth. But what a short time you have been in the dining-room. It seems as if we had only just left.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

I was bored to death. Never opened my lips the whole time. Absolutely longing to come in to you.

MRS. ALLONBY

You should have. The American girl has been giving us a lecture.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Really? All Americans lecture, I believe. I suppose it is something in their climate. What did she lecture about?

MRS. ALLONBY

Oh, Puritanism, of course.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

I am going to convert her, am I not? How long do you give me?

MRS. ALLONBY

A week.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

A week is more than enough.

[*Enter Gerald and Lord Alfred.*]

GERALD

[*Going to Mrs. Arbuthnot.*] Dear mother!

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

Gerald, I don't feel at all well. See me home, Gerald. I shouldn't have come.

GERALD

I am so sorry, mother. Certainly. But you must know Lord Illingworth first. [*Goes across room.*]

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

Not to-night, Gerald.

GERALD

Lord Illingworth, I want you so much to know my mother.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

With the greatest pleasure. [*To Mrs. Allonby.*] I'll be back in a moment. People's mothers always bore me to death. All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy.

MRS. ALLONBY

No man does. That is his.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

What a delightful mood you are in to-night! [*Turns round and goes across with Gerald to*

Mrs. Arbuthnot. When he sees her, he starts back in wonder. Then slowly his eyes turn towards Gerald.]

GERALD

Mother, this is Lord Illingworth, who has offered to take me as his private secretary. [*Mrs. Arbuthnot bows coldly.*] It is a wonderful opening for me, isn't it? I hope he won't be disappointed in me, that is all. You'll thank Lord Illingworth, mother, won't you?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

Lord Illingworth is very good, I am sure, to interest himself in you for the moment.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

[*Putting his hand on Gerald's shoulder.*] Oh, Gerald and I are great friends, already, Mrs. . . . Arbuthnot.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

There can be nothing in common between you and my son, Lord Illingworth.

GERALD

Dear mother, how can you say so? Of course, Lord Illingworth is awfully clever and that sort

of thing. There is nothing Lord Illingworth doesn't know.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

My dear boy!

GERALD

He knows more about life than any one I have ever met. I feel an awful duffer when I am with you, Lord Illingworth. Of course, I have had so few advantages. I have not been to Eton or Oxford like other chaps. But Lord Illingworth doesn't seem to mind that. He has been awfully good to me, mother.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

Lord Illingworth may change his mind. He may not really want you as his secretary.

GERALD

Mother!

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

You must remember, as you said yourself, you have had so few advantages.

MRS. ALLONBY

Lord Illingworth, I want to speak to you for a moment. Do come over.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Will you excuse me, Mrs. Arbuthnot? Now, don't let your charming mother make any more difficulties, Gerald. The thing is quite settled, isn't it?

GERALD

I hope so. [*Lord Illingworth goes across to Mrs. Allonby.*]

MRS. ALLONBY

I thought you were never going to leave the lady in black velvet.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

She is excessively handsome. [*Looks at Mrs. Arbuthnot.*]

LADY HUNSTANTON

Caroline, shall we all make a move to the music-room? Miss Worsley is going to play. You'll come too, dear Mrs. Arbuthnot, won't you? You don't know what a treat is in store for you. [*To Doctor Daubeny.*] I must really take Miss Worsley down some afternoon to the rectory. I should so much like dear Mrs. Daubeny to hear her on the violin. Ah, I forgot.

Dear Mrs. Daubeny's hearing is a little defective, is it not?

THE ARCHDEACON

Her deafness is a great privation to her. She can't even hear my sermons now. She reads them at home. But she has many resources in herself, many resources.

LADY HUNSTANTON

She reads a good deal, I suppose?

THE ARCHDEACON

Just the very largest print. The eyesight is rapidly going. But she's never morbid, never morbid.

GERALD

[*To Lord Illingworth.*] Do speak to my mother, Lord Illingworth, before you go into the music-room. She seems to think, somehow, you don't mean what you said to me.

MRS. ALLONBY

Aren't you coming?

LORD ILLINGWORTH

In a few moments. Lady Hunstanton, if Mrs.

Arbuthnot would allow me, I would like to say a few words to her, and we will join you later on.

LADY HUNSTANTON

Ah, of course. You will have a great deal to say to her, and she will have a great deal to thank you for. It is not every son who gets such an offer, Mrs. Arbuthnot. But I know you appreciate that, dear.

LADY CAROLINE

John!

LADY HUNSTANTON

Now, don't keep Mrs. Arbuthnot too long, Lord Illingworth. We can't spare her.

[*Exit following the other guests. Sound of violin heard from music-room.*]

LORD ILLINGWORTH

So that is our son, Rachel! Well, I am very proud of him. He is a Harford, every inch of him. By the way, why Arbuthnot, Rachel?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

One name is as good as another, when one has no right to any name.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

I suppose so—But why Gerald?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

After a man whose heart I broke—after my father.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Well, Rachel, what is over is over. All I have got to say now is that I am very, very much pleased with our boy. The world will know him merely as my private secretary, but to me he will be something very near, and very dear. It is a curious thing, Rachel; my life seemed to be quite complete. It was not so. It lacked something, it lacked a son. I have found my son now, I am glad I have found him.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

You have no right to claim him, or the smallest part of him. The boy is entirely mine, and shall remain mine.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

My dear Rachel, you have had him to yourself for over twenty years. Why not let me have

him for a little now? He is quite as much mine as yours.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

Are you talking of the child you abandoned? Of the child who, as far as you are concerned, might have died of hunger and of want?

LORD ILLINGWORTH

You forget, Rachel, it was you who left me. It was not I who left you.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

I left you because you refused to give the child a name. Before my son was born, I implored you to marry me.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

I had no expectations then. And besides, Rachel, I wasn't much older than you were. I was only twenty-two. I was twenty-one, I believe, when the whole thing began in your father's garden.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

When a man is old enough to do wrong he should be old enough to do right also.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

My dear Rachel, intellectual generalities are always interesting, but generalities in morals mean absolutely nothing. As for saying I left our child to starve, that, of course, is untrue and silly. My mother offered you six hundred a year. But you wouldn't take anything. You simply disappeared, and carried the child away with you.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

I wouldn't have accepted a penny from her. Your father was different. He told you, in my presence, when we were in Paris, that it was your duty to marry me.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Oh, duty is what one expects from others, it is not what one does one's-self. Of course, I was influenced by my mother. Every man is when he is young.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

I am glad to hear you say so. Gerald shall certainly not go away with you.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

What nonsense, Rachel!

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

Do you think I would allow my son——

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Our son.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

My son [*Lord Illingworth shrugs his shoulders*]— to go away with the man who spoiled my youth, who ruined my life, who has tainted every moment of my days? You don't realise what my past has been in suffering and in shame.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

My dear Rachel, I must candidly say that I think Gerald's future considerably more important than your past.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

Gerald cannot separate his future from my past.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

That is exactly what he should do. That is exactly what you should help him to do. What a typical woman you are! You talk sentimentally, and you are thoroughly selfish the whole

time. But don't let us have a scene. Rachel, I want you to look at this matter from the common-sense point of view, from the point of view of what is best for our son, leaving you and me out of the question. What is our son at present? An underpaid clerk in a small Provincial Bank in a third-rate English town. If you imagine he is quite happy in such a position, you are mistaken. He is thoroughly discontented.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

He was not discontented till he met you. You have made him so.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Of course, I made him so. Discontent is the first step in the progress of a man or a nation. But I did not leave him with a mere longing for things he could not get. No, I made him a charming offer. He jumped at it, I need hardly say. Any young man would. And now, simply because it turns out that I am the boy's own father and he my own son, you propose practically to ruin his career. That is to say, if I were a perfect stranger, you would allow Gerald to go away with me, but as he is my own flesh

and blood you won't. How utterly illogical you are!

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

I will not allow him to go.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

How can you prevent it? What excuse can you give to him for making him decline such an offer as mine? I won't tell him in what relations I stand to him, I need hardly say. But you daren't tell him. You know that. Look how you have brought him up.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

I have brought him up to be a good man.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Quite so. And what is the result? You have educated him to be your judge if he ever finds you out. And a bitter, an unjust judge he will be to you. Don't be deceived, Rachel. Children begin by loving their parents. After a time they judge them. Rarely, if ever, do they forgive them.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

George, don't take my son away from me. I

have had twenty years of sorrow, and I have only had one thing to love me, only one thing to love. You have had a life of joy, and pleasure, and success. You have been quite happy, you have never thought of us. There was no reason, according to your views of life, why you should have remembered us at all. Your meeting us was a mere accident, a horrible accident. Forget it. Don't come now, and rob me of . . . of all I have, of all I have in the whole world. You are so rich in other things. Leave me the little vineyard of my life; leave me the walled-in garden and the well of water; the ewe-lamb God sent me, in pity or in wrath, oh! leave me that. George, don't take Gerald from me.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Rachel, at the present moment you are not necessary to Gerald's career; I am. There is nothing more to be said on the subject.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

I will not let him go..

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Here is Gerald. He has a right to decide for himself.

Well, dear mother, I hope you have settled it all with Lord Illingworth?' "

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[*Enter Gerald.*]

GERALD

Well, dear mother, I hope you have settled it all with Lord Illingworth?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

I have not, Gerald.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Your mother seems not to like your coming with me, for some reason.

GERALD

Why, mother?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

I thought you were quite happy here with me, Gerald. I didn't know you were so anxious to leave me.

GERALD

Mother, how can you talk like that? Of course I have been quite happy with you. But a man can't always stay with his mother. No chap does. I want to make myself a position, to do something. I thought you would have been proud to see me Lord Illingworth's secretary.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

I do not think you would be suitable as a private secretary to Lord Illingworth. You have no qualifications.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

I don't wish to seem to interfere for a moment, Mrs. Arbuthnot, but as far as your last objection is concerned, I surely am the best judge. And I can only tell you that your son has all the qualifications I had hoped for. He has more, in fact, than I had even thought of. Far more. [*Mrs. Arbuthnot remains silent.*] Have you any other reason, Mrs. Arbuthnot, why you don't wish your son to accept this post?

GERALD

Have you, mother. Do answer.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

If you have, Mrs. Arbuthnot, pray, pray say it. We are quite by ourselves here. Whatever it is, I need not say I will not repeat it.

GERALD

Mother?

LORD ILLINGWORTH

If you would like to be alone with your son, I will leave you. You may have some other reason you don't wish me to hear.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

I have no other reason.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Then, my dear boy, we may look on the thing as settled. Come, you and I will smoke a cigarette on the terrace together. And Mrs. Arbuthnot, pray let me tell you, that I think you have acted very, very wisely.

[*Exit with Gerald. Mrs. Arbuthnot is left alone. She stands immobile, with a look of unutterable sorrow on her face.*]

ACT-DROP.

THIRD ACT.

SCENE—*The Picture Gallery at Hunstanton. Door at back leading on to terrace.*

[*Lord Illingworth and Gerald, R.C. Lord Illingworth lolling on a sofa. Gerald in a chair.*]

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Thoroughly sensible woman, your mother, Gerald. I knew she would come round in the end.

GERALD

My mother is awfully conscientious, Lord Illingworth, and I know she doesn't think I am educated enough to be your secretary. She is perfectly right, too. I was fearfully idle when I was at school, and I couldn't pass an examination now to save my life.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

My dear Gerald, examinations are of no value whatsoever. If a man is a gentleman, he knows quite enough, and if he is not a gentleman, whatever he knows is bad for him.

GERALD

But I am so ignorant of the world, Lord Illingworth.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Don't be afraid, Gerald. Remember that you've got on your side the most wonderful thing in the world—youth! There is nothing like youth. The middle-aged are mortgaged to Life. The old are in Life's lumber-room. But youth is the Lord of Life. Youth has a kingdom waiting for it. Every one is born a king, and most people die in exile, like most kings. To win back my youth, Gerald, there is nothing I wouldn't do—except take exercise, get up early, or be a useful member of the community.

GERALD

But you don't call yourself old, Lord Illingworth?

LORD ILLINGWORTH

I am old enough to be your father, Gerald.

GERALD

I don't remember my father; he died years ago.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

So Lady Hunstanton told me.

GERALD

It is very curious, my mother never talks to me about my father. I sometimes think she must have married beneath her.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

[*Winces slightly.*] Really? [*Goes over and puts his hand on Gerald's shoulder.*] You have missed not having a father, I suppose, Gerald?

GERALD

Oh, no; my mother has been so good to me. No one ever had such a mother as I have had.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

I am quite sure of that. Still I should imagine that most mothers don't quite understand their sons. Don't realise, I mean, that a son has ambitions, a desire to see life, to make himself a name. After all, Gerald, you couldn't

be expected to pass all your life in such a hole as Wrockley, could you?

GERALD

Oh, no! It would be dreadful!

LORD ILLINGWORTH

A mother's love is very touching, of course, but it is often curiously selfish. I mean, there is a good deal of selfishness in it.

GERALD

[*Slowly.*] I suppose there is.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Your mother is a thoroughly good woman. But good women have such limited views of life, their horizon is so small, their interests are so petty, aren't they?

GERALD

They are awfully interested, certainly, in things we don't care much about.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

I suppose your mother is very religious, and that sort of thing.

GERALD

Oh, yes, she's always going to church.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Ah! she is not modern, and to be modern is the only thing worth being now-a-days. You want to be modern, don't you, Gerald? You want to know life as it really is. Not to be put off with any old-fashioned theories about life. Well, what you have to do at present is simply to fit yourself for the best society. A man who can dominate a London dinner-table can dominate the world. The future belongs to the dandy. It is the exquisites who are going to rule.

GERALD

I should like to wear nice things awfully, but I have always been told that a man should not think too much about his clothes.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

People now-a-days are so absolutely superficial that they don't understand the philosophy of the superficial. By the way, Gerald, you should learn how to tie your tie better. Sentiment is all very well for the button-hole. But

the essential thing for a necktie is style. A well-tied tie is the first serious step in life.

GERALD

[*Laughing.*] I might be able to learn how to tie a tie, Lord Illingworth, but I should never be able to talk as you do. I don't know how to talk.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Oh! talk to every woman as if you loved her, and to every man as if he bored you, and at the end of your first season you will have the reputation of possessing the most perfect social tact.

GERALD

But it is very difficult to get into society, isn't it?

LORD ILLINGWORTH

To get into the best society, now-a-days, one has either to feed people, amuse people, or shock people—that is all.

GERALD

I suppose society is wonderfully delightful!

LORD ILLINGWORTH

To be in it is merely a bore. But to be out

of it simply a tragedy. Society is a necessary thing. No man has any real success in this world unless he has got women to back him, and women rule society. If you have not got women on your side you are quite over. You might just as well be a barrister, or a stockbroker, or a journalist at once.

GERALD

It is very difficult to understand women, is it not?

LORD ILLINGWORTH

You should never try to understand them. Women are pictures. Men are problems. If you want to know what a woman really means —which, by the way, is always a dangerous thing to do—look at her, don't listen to her.

GERALD

But women are awfully clever, aren't they?

LORD ILLINGWORTH

One should always tell them so. But, to the philosopher, my dear Gerald, women represent the triumph of matter over mind—just as men represent the triumph of mind over morals.

GERALD

How then can women have so much power as you say they have?

LORD ILLINGWORTH

The history of women is the history of the worst form of tyranny the world has ever known. The tyranny of the weak over the strong. It is the only tyranny that lasts.

GERALD

But haven't women got a refining influence?

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Nothing refines but the intellect.

GERALD

Still, there are many different kinds of women, aren't there?

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Only two kinds in society: the plain and the coloured.

GERALD

But there are good women in society, aren't there?

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Far too many.

GERALD

But do you think women shouldn't be good?

LORD ILLINGWORTH

One should never tell them so, they'd all become good at once. Women are a fascinatingly wilful sex. Every woman is a rebel, and usually in wild revolt against herself.

GERALD

You have never been married, Lord Illingworth, have you?

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Men marry because they are tired; women because they are curious. Both are disappointed.

GERALD

But don't you think one can be happy when one is married?

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Perfectly happy. But the happiness of a married man, my dear Gerald, depends on the people he has not married.

GERALD

But if one is in love?

LORD ILLINGWORTH

One should always be in love. That is the reason one should never marry.

GERALD

Love is a very wonderful thing, isn't it?

LORD ILLINGWORTH

When one is in love one begins by deceiving one's-self. And one ends by deceiving others. That is what the world calls a romance. But a really *grande passion* is comparatively rare now-a-days. It is the privilege of people who have nothing to do. That is the one use of the idle classes in a country, and the only possible explanation of us Harfords.

GERALD

Harfords, Lord Illingworth?

LORD ILLINGWORTH

That is my family name. You should study the Peerage, Gerald. It is the one book a young man about town should know thoroughly, and it is the best thing in fiction the English have ever

done. And now, Gerald, you are going now into a perfectly new life with me, and I want you to know how to live. [*Mrs. Arbuthnot appears on terrace behind.*] For the world has been made by fools that wise men should live in it!

[*Enter L.C. Lady Hunstanton and Dr. Daubeny.*]

LADY HUNSTANTON

Ah! here you are, dear Lord Illingworth. Well, I suppose you have been telling our young friend, Gerald, what his new duties are to be, and giving him a great deal of good advice over a pleasant cigarette.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

I have been giving him the best of advice, Lady Hunstanton, and the best of cigarettes.

LADY HUNSTANTON

I am so sorry I was not here to listen to you, but I suppose I am too old now to learn. Except from you, dear Archdeacon, when you are in your nice pulpit. But then I always know what you are going to say, so I don't feel alarmed. [*Sees Mrs. Arbuthnot.*] Ah! dear Mrs. Arbuth-

not, do come and join us. Come, dear. [*Enter Mrs. Arbuthnot.*] Gerald has been having such a long talk with Lord Illingworth; I am sure you must feel very much flattered at the pleasant way in which everything has turned out for him. Let us sit down. [*They sit down.*] And how is your beautiful embroidery going on?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

I am always at work, Lady Hunstanton.

LADY HUNSTANTON

Mrs. Daubeny embroiders a little, too, doesn't she?

THE ARCHDEACON

She was very deft with her needle once, quite a Dorcas. But the gout has crippled her fingers a good deal. She has not touched the tambour frame for nine or ten years. But she has many other amusements. She is very much interested in her own health.

LADY HUNSTANTON

Ah! that is always a nice distraction, is it not? Now, what are you talking about, Lord Illingworth? Do tell us.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

I was on the point of explaining to Gerald that the world has always laughed at its own tragedies, that being the only way in which it has been able to bear them. And that, consequently, whatever the world has treated seriously belongs to the comedy side of things.

LADY HUNSTANTON

Now I am quite out of my depth. I usually am when Lord Illingworth says anything. And the Humane Society is most careless. They never rescue me. I am left to sink. I have a dim idea, dear Lord Illingworth, that you are always on the side of the sinners, and I know I always try to be on the side of the saints, but that is as far as I get. And after all, it may be merely the fancy of a drowning person.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

The only difference between the saint and the sinner is that every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future.

LADY HUNSTANTON

Ah! that quite does for me. I haven't a word to say. You and I, dear Mrs. Arbuthnot, are

behind the age. We can't follow Lord Illingworth. Too much care was taken with our education, I am afraid. To have been well brought up is a great drawback now-a-days. It shuts one out from so much.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

I should be sorry to follow Lord Illingworth in any of his opinions.

LADY HUNSTANTON

You are quite right, dear.

[*Gerald shrugs his shoulders and looks irritably over at his mother. Enter Lady Caroline.*]

LADY CAROLINE

Jane, have you seen John anywhere?

LADY HUNSTANTON

You needn't be anxious about him, dear. He is with Lady Stutfield; I saw them some time ago, in the Yellow Drawing-room. They seem quite happy together. You are not going, Caroline? Pray sit down.

LADY CAROLINE

I think I had better look after Jonn.

[*Exit Lady Caroline.*]

LADY HUNSTANTON

It doesn't do to pay men so much attention. And Caroline has really nothing to be anxious about. Lady Stutfield is very sympathetic. She is just as sympathetic about one thing as she is about another. A beautiful nature.

[*Enter Sir John and Mrs. Allonby.*]

Ah! here is Sir John! And with Mrs. Allonby too! I suppose it was Mrs. Allonby I saw him with. Sir John, Caroline has been looking everywhere for you.

MRS. ALLONBY

We have been waiting for her in the Music-room, dear Lady Hunstanton.

LADY HUNSTANTON

Ah! the Music-room, of course. I thought it was the Yellow Drawing-room, my memory is getting so defective. [*To the Archdeacon.*] Mrs. Daubeny has a wonderful memory, hasn't she?

THE ARCHDEACON

She used to be quite remarkable for her memory, but since her last attack she recalls chiefly the events of her early childhood. But

she finds great pleasure in such retrospections, great pleasure.

[*Enter Lady Stutfield and Mr. Kelvil.*]

LADY HUNSTANTON

Ah! dear Lady Stutfield! and what has Mr. Kelvil been talking to you about?

LADY STUTFIELD

About Bimetallism, as well as I remember.

LADY HUNSTANTON

Bimetallism! Is that quite a nice subject? However, I know people discuss everything very freely now-a-days. What did Sir John talk to you about, dear Mrs. Allonby?

MRS. ALLONBY

About Patagonia.

LADY HUNSTANTON

Really? What a remote topic! But very improving, I have no doubt.

MRS. ALLONBY

He has been most interesting on the subject of Patagonia. Savages seem to have quite the

same views as cultured people on almost all subjects. They are excessively advanced.

LADY HUNSTANTON

What do they do?

MRS. ALLONBY

Apparently everything.

LADY HUNSTANTON

Well, it is very gratifying, dear Archdeacon, is it not, to find that Human Nature is permanently one.—On the whole, the world is the same world, is it not?

LORD ILLINGWORTH

The world is simply divided into two classes—those who believe the incredible, like the public —and those who do the improbable——

MRS. ALLONBY

Like yourself?

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Yes; I am always astonishing myself. It is the only thing that makes life worth living.

LADY STUTFIELD

And what have you been doing lately that astonishes you?

LORD ILLINGWORTH

I have been discovering all kinds of beautiful qualities in my own nature.

MRS. ALLONBY

Ah! don't become quite perfect all at once. Do it gradually!

LORD ILLINGWORTH

I don't intend to grow perfect at all. At least, I hope I shan't. It would be most inconvenient. Women love us for our defects. If we have enough of them, they will forgive us everything, even our gigantic intellects.

MRS. ALLONBY

It is premature to ask us to forgive analysis. We forgive adoration; that is quite as much as should be expected from us.

[*Enter Lord Alfred. He joins Lady Stutfield.*]

LADY HUNSTANTON

Ah! we women should forgive everything,

shouldn't we, dear Mrs. Arbuthnot? I am sure you agree with me in that.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

I do not, Lady Hunstanton. I think there are many things women should never forgive.

LADY HUNSTANTON

What sort of things?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

The ruin of another woman's life.

[*Moves slowly away to back of stage.*]

LADY HUNSTANTON

Ah! those things are very sad, no doubt, but I believe there are admirable homes where people of that kind are looked after and reformed, and I think on the whole that the secret of life is to take things very, very easily.

MRS. ALLONBY

The secret of life is never to have an emotion that is unbecoming.

LADY STUTFIELD

The secret of life is to appreciate the pleasure of being terribly, terribly deceived.

KELVIL

The secret of life is to resist temptation, Lady Stutfield.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

There is no secret of life. Life's aim, if it has one, is simply to be always looking for temptations. There are not nearly enough. I sometimes pass a whole day without coming across a single one. It is quite dreadful. It makes one so nervous about the future.

LADY HUNSTANTON

[*Shakes her fan at him.*] I don't know how it is, dear Lord Illingworth, but everything you have said to-day seems to me excessively immoral. It has been most interesting, listening to you.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

All thought is immoral. Its very essence is destruction. If you think of anything, you kill it. Nothing survives being thought of.

LADY HUNSTANTON

I don't understand a word, Lord Illingworth. But I have no doubt it is all quite true. Person-

ally, I have very little to reproach myself with, on the score of thinking. I don't believe in women thinking too much. Women should think in moderation, as they should do all things in moderation.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Moderation is a fatal thing, Lady Hunstanton. Nothing succeeds like excess.

LADY HUNSTANTON

I hope I shall remember that. It sounds an admirable maxim. But I'm beginning to forget everything. It's a great misfortune.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

It is one of your most fascinating qualities, Lady Hunstanton. No woman should have a memory. Memory in a woman is the beginning of dowdiness. One can always tell from a woman's bonnet whether she has got a memory or not.

LADY HUNSTANTON

How charming you are, dear Lord Illingworth. You always find out that one's most

glaring fault is one's most important virtue. You have the most comforting views of life.

[*Enter Farquhar.*]

FARQUHAR

Doctor Daubeny's carriage!

LADY HUNSTANTON

My dear Archdeacon! It is only half-past ten.

THE ARCHDEACON

[*Rising.*] I am afraid I must go, Lady Hunstanton. Tuesday is always one of Mrs. Daubeny's bad nights.

LADY HUNSTANTON

[*Rising.*] Well, I won't keep you from her. [*Goes with him towards door.*] I have told Farquhar to put a brace of partridge into the carriage. Mrs. Daubeny may fancy them.

THE ARCHDEACON

It is very kind of you, but Mrs. Daubeny never touches solids now. Lives entirely on jellies. But she is wonderfully cheerful, wonderfully cheerful. She has nothing to complain of. [*Exit with Lady Hunstanton.*]

MRS. ALLONBY

[*Goes over to Lord Illingworth.*] There is a beautiful moon to-night.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Let us go and look at it. To look at anything that is inconstant is charming now-a-days.

MRS. ALLONBY

You have your looking-glass.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

It is unkind. It merely shows me my wrinkles.

MRS. ALLONBY

Mine is better behaved. It never tells me the truth.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Then it is in love with you.

[*Exeunt Sir John, Lady Stutfield, Mr. Kelvil, and Lord Alfred.*]

GERALD [*to Lord Illingworth.*]

May I come too?

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Do, my dear boy. [*Moves towards door with Mrs. Allonby and Gerald.*]

[*Lady Caroline enters, looks rapidly round and goes out in opposite direction to that taken by Sir John and Lady Stutfield.*]

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

Gerald!

GERALD

What, mother!

[*Exit Lord Illingworth with Mrs. Allonby.*]

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

It is getting late. Let us go home.

GERALD

My dear mother. Do let us wait a little longer. Lord Illingworth is so delightful, and, by the way, mother, I have a great surprise for you. We are starting for India at the end of this month.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

Let us go home.

GERALD

If you really want to, of course, mother, but I must bid good-bye to Lord Illingworth first. I'll be back in five minutes. [*Exit.*]

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

Let him leave me if he chooses, but not with him—not with him! I couldn't bear it. [*Walks up and down.*]

[*Enter Hester.*]

HESTER

What a lovely night it is, Mrs. Arbuthnot.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

Is it?

HESTER

Mrs. Arbuthnot, I wish you would let us be friends. You are so different from the other women here. When you came into the drawing-room this evening, somehow you brought with you a sense of what is good and pure in life. I had been foolish. There are things that are right to say, but that may be said at the wrong time and to the wrong people.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

I heard what you said. I agree with it, Miss Worsley.

HESTER

I didn't know you had heard it. But I knew you would agree with me. A woman who has sinned should be punished, shouldn't she?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

Yes.

HESTER

She shouldn't be allowed to come into the society of good men and women?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

She should not.

HESTER

And the man should be punished in the same way?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

In the same way. And the children, if there are children, in the same way also?

HESTER

Yes, it is right that the sins of the parents

should be visited on the children. It is a just law. It is God's law.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

It is one of God's terrible laws.

[*Moves away to fireplace.*]

HESTER

You are distressed about your son leaving you, Mrs. Arbuthnot?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

Yes.

HESTER

Do you like him going away with Lord Illingworth? Of course there is position, no doubt, and money, but position and money are not everything, are they?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

They are nothing; they bring misery.

HESTER

Then why do you let your son go with him?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

He wishes it himself.

HESTER

But if you asked him he would stay, would he not?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

He has set his heart on going.

HESTER

He couldn't refuse you anything. He loves you too much. Ask him to stay. Let me send him in to you. He is on the terrace at this moment with Lord Illingworth. I heard them laughing together as I passed through the Music-room.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

Don't trouble, Miss Worsley, I can wait. It is of no consequence.

HESTER

No, I'll tell him you want him. Do—do ask him to stay. [*Exit Hester.*]

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

He won't come—I know he won't come.

[*Enter Lady Caroline. She looks round anxiously. Enter Gerald.*]

LADY CAROLINE

Mr. Arbuthnot, may I ask you is Sir John anywhere on the terrace?

GERALD

No, Lady Caroline, he is not on the terrace.

LADY CAROLINE

It is very curious. It is time for him to retire. [*Exit Lady Caroline.*]

GERALD

Dear mother, I am afraid I kept you waiting. I forgot all about it. I am so happy to-night, mother; I have never been so happy.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

At the prospect of going away?

GERALD

Don't put it like that, mother. Of course I am sorry to leave you. Why, you are the best mother in the whole world. But after all, as Lord Illingworth says, it is impossible to live in such a place as Wrockley. You don't mind it. But I'm ambitious; I want something more than that. I want to have a career. I want to do

something that will make you proud of me, and Lord Illingworth is going to help me. He is going to do everything for me.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

Gerald, don't go away with Lord Illingworth. I implore you not to. Gerald, I beg you!

GERALD

Mother, how changeable you are! You don't seem to know your own mind for a single moment. An hour and a half ago in the Drawing-room you agreed to the whole thing; now you turn round and make objections, and try to force me to give up my one chance in life. Yes, my one chance. You don't suppose that men like Lord Illingworth are to be found every day, do you, mother? It is very strange that when I have had such a wonderful piece of good luck, the one person to put difficulties in my way should be my own mother. Besides, you know, mother, I love Hester Worsley. Who could help loving her? I love her more than I have ever told you, far more. And if I had a position, if I had prospects, I could—I could ask her to—Don't you understand now, mother, what it means to me to be Lord Illingworth's secretary?

To start like that is to find a career ready for one—before one—waiting for one. If I were Lord Illingworth's secretary I could ask Hester to be my wife. As a wretched bank clerk with a hundred a year it would be an impertinence.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

I fear you need have no hopes of Miss Worsley. I know her views on life. She has just told them to me. [*A pause.*]

GERALD

Then I have my ambition left, at any rate. That is something—I am glad I have that! You have always tried to crush my ambition, mother—haven't you? You have told me that the world is a wicked place, that success is not worth having, that society is shallow, and all that sort of thing—well, I don't believe it, mother. I think the world must be delightful. I think society must be exquisite. I think success is a thing worth having. You have been wrong in all that you taught me, mother, quite wrong. Lord Illingworth is a successful man. He is a fashionable man. He is a man who lives in the world and for it. Well, I would give anything to be just like Lord Illingworth.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

I would sooner see you dead.

GERALD

Mother, what is your objection to Lord Illingworth? Tell me—tell me right out. What is it?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

He is a bad man.

GERALD

In what way bad? I don't understand what you mean.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

I will tell you.

GERALD

I suppose you think him bad because he doesn't believe the same things as you do. Well, men are different from women, mother. It is natural that they should have different views.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

It is not what Lord Illingworth believes, or what he does not believe, that makes him bad. It is what he is.

GERALD

Mother, is it something you know of him? Something you actually know?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

It is something I know.

GERALD

Something you are quite sure of?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

Quite sure of.

GERALD

How long have you known it?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

For twenty years.

GERALD

Is it fair to go back twenty years in any man's career? And what have you or I to do with Lord Illingworth's early life? What business is it of ours?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

What this man has been, he is now, and will be always.

GERALD

Mother, tell me what Lord Illingworth did? If he did anything shameful, I will not go away with him. Surely you know me well enough for that?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

Gerald, come near to me. Quite close to me, as you used to do when you were a little boy, when you were your mother's own boy. [*Gerald sits down beside his mother. She runs her fingers through his hair, and strokes his hands.*] Gerald, there was a girl once, she was very young, she was a little over eighteen at the time. George Harford—that was Lord Illingworth's name then—George Harford met her. She knew nothing about life. He—knew everything. He made this girl love him. He made her love him so much that she left her father's house with him one morning. She loved him so much, and he had promised to marry her! He had solemnly promised to marry her, and she had believed him. She was very young, and—and ignorant of what life really is. But he put the marriage off from week to week, and month to month.—She trusted in him all the while. She

loved him.—Before her child was born—for she had a child—she implored him for the child's sake to marry her, that the child might have a name, that her sin might not be visited on the child, who was innocent. He refused. After the child was born she left him, taking the child away, and her life was ruined, and her soul ruined, and all that was sweet, and good, and pure in her ruined also. She suffered terribly —she suffers now. She will always suffer. For her there is no joy, no peace, no atonement. She is a woman who drags a chain like a guilty thing. She is a woman who wears a mask, like a thing that is a leper. The fire cannot purify her. The waters cannot quench her anguish. Nothing can heal her! no anodyne can give her sleep! no poppies forgetfulness! She is lost! She is a lost soul!—That is why I call Lord Illingworth a bad man. That is why I don't want my boy to be with him.

GERALD

My dear mother, it all sounds very tragic, of course. But I dare say the girl was just as much to blame as Lord Illingworth was.—After all, would a really nice girl, a girl with any

nice feelings at all, go away from her home with a man to whom she was not married, and live with him as his wife? No nice girl would.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

[*After a pause.*] Gerald, I withdraw all my objections. You are at liberty to go away with Lord Illingworth, when and where you choose.

GERALD

Dear mother, I knew you wouldn't stand in my way. You are the best woman God ever made. And, as for Lord Illingworth, I don't believe he is capable of anything infamous or base. I can't believe it of him—I can't.

HESTER

[*Outside.*] Let me go! Let me go!

[*Enter Hester in terror, and rushes over to Gerald and flings herself in his arms.*]

HESTER

Oh! save me—save me from him!

GERALD

From whom?

HESTER

He has insulted me! Horribly insulted me! Save me!

GERALD

Who? Who has dared——?

[*Lord Illingworth enters at back of stage. Hester breaks from Gerald's arms and points to him.*]

GERALD [*He is quite beside himself with rage and indignation.*]

Lord Illingworth, you have insulted the purest thing on God's earth, a thing as pure as my own mother. You have insulted the woman I love most in the world with my own mother. As there is a God in heaven, I will kill you.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

[*Rushing across and catching hold of him.*] No! no!

GERALD

[*Thrusting her back.*] Don't hold me, mother. Don't hold me—I'll kill him!

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

Gerald!

GERALD

Let me go, I say!

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

Stop, Gerald, stop! He is your own father!

[*Gerald clutches his mother's hand and looks into her face. She sinks slowly on the ground in shame. Hester steals towards the door. Lord Illingworth frowns and bites his lip. After a time Gerald raises his mother up, puts his arm around her, and leads her from the room.*]

ACT-DROP.

FOURTH ACT.

SCENE—*Sitting-room at Mrs. Arbuthnot's. Large open French window at back, looking on to garden. Doors R.C. and L.C.*

[*Gerald Arbuthnot writing at table.*]

[*Enter Alice R.C. followed by Lady Hunstanton and Mrs. Allonby.*]

ALICE

Lady Hunstanton and Mrs. Allonby.

[*Exit L.C.*]

LADY HUNSTANTON

Good morning, Gerald.

GERALD

[*Rising.*] Good morning, Lady Hunstanton. Good morning, Mrs. Allonby.

LADY HUNSTANTON

[*Sitting down.*] We came to inquire for your dear mother, Gerald. I hope she is better?

GERALD

My mother has not come down yet, Lady Hunstanton.

LADY HUNSTANTON

Ah, I am afraid the heat was too much for her last night. I think there must have been thunder in the air. Or perhaps it was the music. Music makes one feel so romantic—at least it always gets on one's nerves.

MRS. ALLONBY

It's the same thing, now-a-days.

LADY HUNSTANTON

I am so glad I don't know what you mean, dear. I am afraid you mean something wrong. Ah, I see you're examining Mrs. Arbuthnot's pretty room. Isn't it nice and old-fashioned?

MRS. ALLONBY

[*Surveying the room through her lorgnette.*] It looks quite the happy English home.

LADY HUNSTANTON

That's just the word, dear; that just describes

it. One feels your mother's good influence in everything she has about her, Gerald.

MRS. ALLONBY

Lord Illingworth says that all influence is bad, but that a good influence is the worst in the world.

LADY HUNSTANTON

When Lord Illingworth knows Mrs. Arbuthnot better, he will change his mind. I must certainly bring him here.

MRS. ALLONBY

I should like to see Lord Illingworth in a happy English home.

LADY HUNSTANTON

It would do him a great deal of good, dear. Most women in London, now-a-days, seem to furnish their rooms with nothing but orchids, foreigners, and French novels. But here we have the room of a sweet saint. Fresh natural flowers, books that don't shock one, pictures that one can look at without blushing.

MRS. ALLONBY

But I like blushing.

LADY HUNSTANTON

Well, there *is* a good deal to be said for blushing, if one can do it at the proper moment. Poor dear Hunstanton used to tell me I didn't blush nearly often enough. But then he was so very particular. He wouldn't let me know any of his men friends, except those who were over seventy, like poor Lord Ashton: who afterwards, by the way, was brought into the Divorce Court. A most unfortunate case.

MRS. ALLONBY

I delight in men over seventy. They always offer one the devotion of a lifetime. I think seventy an ideal age for a man.

LADY HUNSTANTON

She is quite incorrigible, Gerald, isn't she? By-the-by, Gerald, I hope your dear mother will come and see me more often now. You and Lord Illingworth start almost immediately, don't you?

GERALD

I have given up my intention of being Lord Illingworth's secretary.

LADY HUNSTANTON

Surely not, Gerald! It would be most unwise of you. What reason can you have?

GERALD

I don't think I should be suitable for the post.

MRS. ALLONBY

I wish Lord Illingworth would ask me to be his secretary. But he says I am not serious enough.

LADY HUNSTANTON

My dear, you really mustn't talk like that in this house. Mrs. Arbuthnot doesn't know anything about the wicked society in which we all live. She won't go into it. She is far too good. I consider it was a great honour her coming to me last night. It gave quite an atmosphere of respectability to the party.

MRS. ALLONBY

Ah, that must have been what you thought was thunder in the air.

LADY HUNSTANTON

My dear, how can you say that? There is no

resemblance between the two things at all. But really, Gerald, what do you mean by not being suitable?

GERALD

Lord Illingworth's views of life and mine are too different.

LADY HUNSTANTON

But, my dear Gerald, at your age you shouldn't have any views of life. They are quite out of place. You must be guided by others in this matter. Lord Illingworth has made you the most flattering offer, and travelling with him you would see the world—as much of it, at least, as one should look at—under the best auspices possible, and stay with all the right people, which is so important at this solemn moment in your career.

GERALD

I don't want to see the world; I've seen enough of it.

MRS. ALLONBY

I hope you don't think you have exhausted life, Mr. Arbuthnot. When a man says that one knows that life has exhausted him.

GERALD

I don't wish to leave my mother.

LADY HUNSTANTON

Now, Gerald, that is pure laziness on your part. Not leave your mother! If I were your mother I would insist on your going.

[*Enter Alice L.C.*]

ALICE

Mrs. Arbuthnot's compliments, my lady, but she has a bad headache, and cannot see any one this morning. [*Exit R.C.*.]

LADY HUNSTANTON

[*Rising.*] A bad headache! I am so sorry! Perhaps you'll bring her up to Hunstanton this afternoon, if she is better, Gerald.

GERALD

I am afraid not this afternoon, Lady Hunstanton.

LADY HUNSTANTON

Well, to-morrow, then. Ah, if you had a father, Gerald, he wouldn't let you waste your life here. He would send you off with Lord

Illingworth at once. But mothers are so weak. They give up to their sons in everything. We are all heart, all heart. Come dear, I must call at the rectory and inquire for Mrs. Daubeny, who, I am afraid, is far from well. It is wonderful how the Archdeacon bears up, quite wonderful. He is the most sympathetic of husbands. Quite a model. Good-bye, Gerald, give my fondest love to your mother.

MRS. ALLONBY

Good-bye, Mr. Arbuthnot.

GERALD

Good-bye.

[*Exit Lady Hunstanton and Mrs. Allonby. Gerald sits down and reads over his letter.*]

GERALD

What name can I sign? I, who have no right to any name. [*Signs name, puts letter into envelope, addresses it, and is about to seal it, when Door L.C. opens and Mrs. Arbuthnot enters. Gerald lays down sealing-wax. Mother and son look at each other.*]

LADY HUNSTANTON

[*Through French window at the back.*] Good-bye again, Gerald. We are taking the short cut across your pretty garden. Now, remember my advice to you—start at once with Lord Illingworth.

MRS. ALLONBY

Au revoir, Mr. Arbuthnot. Mind you bring me back something nice from your travels—not an Indian shawl—on no account an Indian shawl. [*Exeunt.*]

GERALD

Mother, I have just written to him.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

To whom?

GERALD

To my father. I have written to tell him to come here at four o'clock this afternoon.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

He shall not come here. He shall not cross the threshold of my house.

GERALD

He must come.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

Gerald, if you are going away with Lord Illingworth, go at once. Go before it kills me; but don't ask me to meet him.

GERALD

Mother, you don't understand. Nothing in the world would induce me to go away with Lord Illingworth, or to leave you. Surely you know me well enough for that. No; I have written to him to say——

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

What can you have to say to him?

GERALD

Can't you guess, mother, what I have written in this letter?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

No.

GERALD

Mother, surely you can. Think, think what

must be done, now, at once, within the next few days.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

There is nothing to be done.

GERALD

I have written to Lord Illingworth to tell him that he must marry you.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

Marry me?

GERALD

Mother, I will force him to do it. The wrong that has been done you must be repaired. Atonement must be made. Justice may be slow, mother, but it comes in the end. In a few days you shall be Lord Illingworth's lawful wife.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

But, Gerald——

GERALD

I will insist upon his doing it. I will make him do it; he will not dare to refuse.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

But, Gerald, it is I who refuse. I will not marry Lord Illingworth.

GERALD

Not marry him? Mother!

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

I will not marry him.

GERALD

But you don't understand; it is for your sake I am talking, not for mine. This marriage, this necessary marriage, this marriage, that, for obvious reasons, must inevitably take place, will not help me, will not give me a name that will be really, rightly mine to bear. But surely it will be something for you, that you, my mother, should, however late, become the wife of the man who is my father. Will not that be something?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

I will not marry him.

GERALD

Mother, you must.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

I will not. You talk of atonement for a wrong done. What atonement can be made to me? There is no atonement possible. I am

disgraced: he is not. That is all. It is the usual history of a man and a woman as it usually happens, as it always happens. And the ending is the ordinary ending. The woman suffers. The man goes free.

GERALD

I don't know if that is the ordinary ending, mother: I hope it is not. But your life, at any rate, shall not end like that. The man shall make whatever reparation is possible. It is not enough. It does not wipe out the past, I know that. But at least it makes the future better, better for you, mother.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

I refuse to marry Lord Illingworth.

GERALD

If he came to you himself and asked you to be his wife you would give him a different answer. Remember, he is my father.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

If he came himself, which he will not do, my answer would be the same. Remember I am your mother.

GERALD

Mother, you make it terribly difficult for me by talking like that, and I can't understand why you won't look at this matter from the right, from the only proper standpoint. It is to take away the bitterness out of your life, to take away the shadow that lies on your name, that this marriage must take place. There is no alternative: and after the marriage you and I can go away together. But the marriage must take place first. It is a duty that you owe, not merely to yourself, but to all other women—yes: to all the other women in the world, lest he betray more.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

I owe nothing to other women. There is not one of them to help me. There is not one woman in the world to whom I could go for pity, if I would take it, or for sympathy, if I could win it. Women are hard on each other. That girl, last night, good though she is, fled from the room as though I were a tainted thing. She was right. I am a tainted thing. But my wrongs are my own, and I will bear them alone. I must bear them alone. What have women who

have not sinned to do with me, or I with them? We do not understand each other.

[*Enter Hester behind.*]

GERALD

I implore you to do what I ask you.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

What son has ever asked of his mother to make so hideous a sacrifice? None.

GERALD

What mother has ever refused to marry the father of her own child? None.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

Let me be the first, then. I will not do it.

GERALD

Mother, you believe in religion, and you brought me up to believe in it also. Well, surely your religion, the religion that you taught me when I was a boy, mother, must tell you that I am right. You know it, you feel it.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

I do not know it. I do not feel it, nor will I ever stand before God's altar and ask God's

blessing on so hideous a mockery as a marriage between me and George Harford. I will not say the words the Church bids us to say. I will not say them. I dare not. How could I swear to love the man I loathe, to honour him who wrought you dishonour, to obey him who, in his mastery, made me to sin? No; marriage is a sacrament for those who love each other. It is not for such as him, or such as me. Gerald, to save you from the world's sneers and taunts I have lied to the world. For twenty years I have lied to the world. I could not tell the world the truth. Who can, ever? But not for my own sake will I lie to God, and in God's presence. No, Gerald, no ceremony, Church-hallowed or State-made, shall ever bind me to George Harford. It may be that I am too bound to him already, who, robbing me, yet left me richer, so that in the mire of my life, I found the pearl of price, or what I thought would be so.

GERALD

I don't understand you now.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

Men don't understand what mothers are. I

am no different from other women except in the wrong done me and the wrong I did, and my very heavy punishments and great disgrace. And yet, to bear you I had to look on death. To nurture you I had to wrestle with it. Death fought with me for you. All women have to fight with death to keep their children. Death, being childless, wants our children from us. Gerald, when you were naked I clothed you, when you were hungry I gave you food. Night and day all that long winter I tended you. No office is too mean, no care too lowly for the thing we women love—and oh! how *I* loved *you*. Not Hannah Samuel more. And you needed love, for you were weakly, and only love could have kept you alive. Only love can keep any one alive. And boys are careless often and without thinking give pain, and we always fancy that when they come to man's estate and know us better, they will repay us. But it is not so. The world draws them from our side, and they make friends with whom they are happier than they are with us, and have amusements from which we are barred, and interests that are not ours: and they are unjust to us often, for when they find life bitter they blame us for it, and

when they find it sweet we do not taste its sweetness with them. . . . You made many friends and went into their houses and were glad with them, and I, knowing my secret, did not dare to follow, but stayed at home and closed the door, shut out the sun and sat in darkness. What should I have done in honest households? My past was ever with me. . . . . And you thought I didn't care for the pleasant things of life. I tell you I longed for them, but did not dare to touch them, feeling I had no right. You thought I was happier working amongst the poor. That was my mission, you imagined. It was not, but where else was I to go? The sick do not ask if the hand that smooths their pillow is pure, nor the dying care if the lips that touch their brow have known the kiss of sin. It was you I thought of all the time; I gave to them the love you did not need: lavished on them a love that was not theirs. . . . And you thought I spent too much of my time going to Church, and in Church duties. But where else could I turn? God's house is the only house where sinners are made welcome, and you were always in my heart, Gerald, too much in my heart. For, though day after day,

at morn or evensong, I have knelt in God's house, I have never repented of my sin. How could I repent of my sin when you, my love, were its fruit! Even now that you are bitter to me I cannot repent. I do not. You are more to me than innocence. I would rather be your mother—oh! much rather!—than have been always pure. . . . Oh, don't you see? don't you understand? It is my dishonour that has made you so dear to me. It is my disgrace that has bound you so closely to me. It is the price I paid for you—the price of soul and body—that makes me love you as I do. Oh, don't ask me to do this horrible thing. Child of my shame, be still the child of my shame!

GERALD

Mother, I didn't know you loved me so much as that. And I will be a better son to you than I have been. And you and I must never leave each other . . . but, mother . . . I can't help it . . . you must become my father's wife. You must marry him. It is your duty.

HESTER

[*Running forward and embracing Mrs. Arbuthnot.*] No, no; you shall not. That would

be real dishonour, the first you have ever known. That would be real disgrace: the first to touch you. Leave him and come with me. There are other countries than England. . . . Oh! other countries over sea, better, wiser, and less unjust lands. The world is very wide and very big.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

No, not for me. For me the world is shrivelled to a palm's breadth, and where I walk there are thorns.

HESTER

It shall not be so. We shall somewhere find green valleys and fresh waters, and if we weep, well, we shall weep together. Have we not both loved him?

GERALD

Hester!

HESTER

[*Waving him back.*] Don't, don't! You cannot love me at all, unless you love her also. You cannot honour me, unless she's holier to you. In her all womanhood is martyred. Not

she alone, but all of us are stricken in her house.

GERALD

Hester, Hester, what shall I do?

HESTER

Do you respect the man who is your father?

GERALD

Respect him? I despise him! He is infamous!

HESTER

I thank you for saving me from him last night.

GERALD

Ah, that is nothing. I would die to save you. But you don't tell me what to do now!

HESTER

Have I not thanked you for saving *me?*

GERALD

But what should I do?

HESTER

Ask your own heart, not mine. I never had a mother to save, or shame.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

He is hard—he is hard. Let me go away.

GERALD

[*Rushes over and kneels down beside his mother.*] Mother, forgive me: I have been to blame.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

Don't kiss my hands: they are cold. My heart is cold: something has broken it.

HESTER

Ah, don't say that. Hearts live by being wounded. Pleasure may turn a heart to stone, riches may make it callous, but sorrow—oh, sorrow cannot break it. Besides, what sorrows have you now? Why at this moment you are more dear to him than ever, *dear* though you have *been,* and oh! how dear you *have* been always. Ah! be kind to him.

GERALD

You are my mother and my father all in one. I need no second parent. It was for you I spoke, for you alone. Oh, say something, mother. Have I but found one love to lose an-

"'Mother forgive me: I have been to blame'"

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other? Don't tell me that. O mother, you are cruel. [*Gets up and flings himself sobbing on a sofa.*]

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

[*To Hester.*] But has he found indeed another love?

HESTER

You know I have loved him always.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

But we are very poor.

GERALD

Who, being loved, is poor? Oh, no one. I hate my riches. They are a burden. Let him share it with me.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

But we are disgraced. We rank among the outcasts. Gerald is nameless. The sins of the parents should be visited on the children. It is God's law.

HESTER

I was wrong. God's law is only Love.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

[*Rises, and taking Hester by the hand, goes slowly over to where Gerald is lying on the sofa with his head buried in his hands. She touches him and he looks up.*] Gerald, I cannot give you a father, but I have brought you a wife.

GERALD

Mother, I am not worthy either of her or you.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

So she comes first, you are worthy. And when you are away, Gerald . . . with . . . her—oh, think of me sometimes. Don't forget me. And when you pray, pray for me. We should pray when we are happiest, and you will be happy, Gerald.

HESTER

Oh, you don't think of leaving us?

GERALD

Mother, you won't leave us?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

I might bring shame upon you!

GERALD

Mother!

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

For a little then: and if you let me, near you always.

HESTER

[*To Mrs. Arbuthnot.*] Come out with us to the garden.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

Later on, later on.

[*Exeunt Hester and Gerald.*]

[*Mrs. Arbuthnot goes toward door L.C. Stops at looking-glass over mantelpiece and looks into it.*]

[*Enter Alice R.C.*]

ALICE

A gentleman to see you, ma'am.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

Say I am not at home. Show me the card. [*Takes card from salver and looks at it.*] Say I will not see him.

[*Lord Illingworth enters. Mrs. Arbuthnot*

sees him in the glass and starts, but does not turn round. Exit Alice.]

What can you have to say to me to-day, George Harford? You can have nothing to say to me. You must leave this house.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Rachel, Gerald knows everything about you and me now, so some arrangement must be come to that will suit us all three. I assure you, he will find in me the most charming and generous of fathers.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

My son may come in at any moment. I saved you last night. I may not be able to save you again. My son feels my dishonour strongly, terribly strongly. I beg you to go.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

[*Sitting down.*] Last night was excessively unfortunate. That silly Puritan girl making a scene merely because I wanted to kiss her. What harm is there in a kiss?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

[*Turning round.*] A kiss may ruin a human

life, George Harford. *I* know that. *I* know that too well.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

We won't discuss that at present. What is of importance to-day, as yesterday, is still our son. I am extremely fond of him, as you know, and odd though it may seem to you, I admired his conduct last night immensely. He took up the cudgels for that pretty prude with wonderful promptitude. He is just what I should have liked a son of mine to be. Except that no son of mine should ever take the side of the Puritans: that is always an error. Now, what I propose is this.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

Lord Illingworth, no proposition of yours interests me.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

According to our ridiculous English laws, I can't legitimise Gerald. But I can leave him my property. Illingworth is entailed, of course, but it is a tedious barrack of a place. He can have Ashby, which is much prettier, Harborough, which has the best shooting in the north

of England, and the house in St. James Square. What more can a gentleman desire in this world?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

Nothing more, I am quite sure.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

As for a title, a title is really rather a nuisance in these democratic days. As George Harford I had everything I wanted. Now I have merely everything that other people want, which isn't nearly so pleasant. Well, my proposal is this.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

I told you I was not interested, and I beg you to go.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

The boy is to be with you for six months in the year, and with me for the other six. That is perfectly fair, is it not? You can have whatever allowance you like, and live where you choose. As for your past, no one knows anything about it except myself and Gerald. There is the Puritan, of course, the Puritan in white

muslin, but she doesn't count. She couldn't tell the story without explaining that she objected to being kissed, could she? And all the women would think her a fool and the men think her a bore. And you need not be afraid that Gerald won't be my heir. I needn't tell you I have not the slightest intention of marrying.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

You come too late. My son has no need of you. You are not necessary.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

What do you mean, Rachel?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

That you are not necessary to Gerald's career. He does not require you.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

I do not understand you.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

Look into the garden. [*Lord Illingworth rises and goes towards window.*] You had better not let them see you: you bring unpleasant memories. [*Lord Illingworth looks out and*

starts.] She loves him. They love each other. We are safe from you, and we are going away.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Where?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

We will not tell you, and if you find us we will not know you. You seem surprised. What welcome would you get from the girl whose lips you tried to soil, from the boy whose life you have shamed, from the mother whose dishonour comes from you.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

You have grown hard, Rachel.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

I was too weak once. It is well for me that I have changed.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

I was very young at the time. We men know life too early.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

And we women know life too late. That is the difference between men and women. [*A pause.*]

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Rachel, I want my son. My money may be of no use to him now. I may be of no use to him, but I want my son. Bring us together, Rachel. You can do it if you choose. [*Sees letter on table.*]

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

There is no room in my boy's life for *you*. He is not interested in *you*.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Then why does he write to me?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

What do you mean?

LORD ILLINGWORTH

What letter is this? [*Takes up letter.*]

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

That—is nothing. Give it to me.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

It is addressed to *me*.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

You are not to open it. I forbid you to open it.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

And in Gerald's handwriting.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

It was not to have been sent. It is a letter he wrote to you this morning before he saw me. But he is sorry now he wrote it, very sorry. You are not to open it. Give it to me.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

It belongs to me. [*Opens it, sits down and reads it slowly. Mrs. Arbuthnot watches him all the time.*] You have read this letter, I suppose, Rachel?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

No.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

You know what is in it?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

Yes!

LORD ILLINGWORTH

I don't admit for a moment that the boy is right in what he says. I don't admit it is any duty of mine to marry you. I deny it entirely.

But to get my son back I am ready—yes, I am ready to marry you, Rachel—and to treat you always with the deference and respect due to my wife. I will marry you as soon as you choose. I give you my word of honour.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

You made that promise to me once before and broke it.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

I will keep it now. And that will show you that I love my son, at least as much as you love him. For when I marry you, Rachel, there are some ambitions I shall have to surrender. High ambitions too, if any ambition is high.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

I decline to marry you, Lord Illingworth.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Are you serious?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

Yes.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Do tell me your reasons. They would interest me enormously.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

I have already explained them to my son.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

I suppose they were intensely sentimental, weren't they? You women live by your emotions and for them. You have no philosophy of life.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

You are right. We women live by our emotions and for them. By our passions, and for them, if you will. I have two passions, Lord Illingworth: my love of him, my hate of you. You cannot kill those. They feed each other.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

What sort of love is that which needs to have hate as its brother?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

It is the sort of love I have for Gerald. Do you think that terrible? Well, it is terrible. All love is terrible. All love is a tragedy. I loved you once, Lord Illingworth. Oh, what a tragedy for a woman to have loved you!

LORD ILLINGWORTH

So you really refuse to marry me?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

Yes.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

Because you hate me?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

Yes.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

And does my son hate me as you do?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

No.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

I am glad of that, Rachel.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

He merely despises you.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

What a pity! What a pity for him, I mean.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

Don't be deceived, George. Children begin

by loving their parents. After a time they judge them. Rarely if ever do they forgive them.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

[*Reads letter over again, very slowly.*] May I ask by what arguments you made the boy who wrote this letter, this beautiful, passionate letter, believe that you should not marry his father, the father of your own child.

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

It was not I who made him see it. It was another.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

What *fin-de-siècle* person?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

The Puritan, Lord Illingworth. [*A pause.*]

LORD ILLINGWORTH

[*Winces, then rises slowly and goes over to table where his hat and gloves are. Mrs. Arbuthnot is standing close to the table. He picks up one of the gloves and begins putting it on.*] There is not much then for me to do here, Rachel?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

Nothing.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

It is good-bye, is it?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

For ever, I hope, this time, Lord Illingworth.

LORD ILLINGWORTH

How curious! At this moment you look exactly as you looked the night you left me twenty years ago. You have just the same expression in your mouth. Upon my word, Rachel, no woman ever loved me as you did. Why, you gave yourself to me like a flower, to do anything I liked with. You were the prettiest of playthings, the most fascinating of small romances. . . . [*Pulls out watch.*] Quarter to two! Must be strolling back to Hunstanton. Don't suppose I shall see you there again. I'm sorry, I am, really. It's been an amusing experience to have met amongst people of one's own rank, and treated quite seriously too, one's mistress and one's——

[*Mrs. Arbuthnot snatches up glove and strikes*

Lord Illingworth across the face with it. Lord Illingworth starts. He is dazed by the insult of his punishment. Then he controls himself, and goes to window and looks out at his son. Sighs, and leaves the room.]

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

[*Falls sobbing on the sofa.*] He would have said it. He would have said it.

[*Enter Gerald and Hester from the garden.*]

GERALD

Well, dear mother. You never came out after all. So we have come in to fetch you. Mother, you have not been crying? [*Kneels down beside her.*]

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

My boy! My boy! My boy! [*Running her fingers through his hair.*]

HESTER

[*Coming over.*] But you have two children now. You'll let me be your daughter?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

[*Looking up.*] Would you choose me for a mother?

HESTER

You of all women I have ever known.

[*They move towards the door leading into garden with their arms round each other's waists. Gerald goes to table L.C. for his hat. On turning round he sees Lord Illingworth's glove lying on the floor, and picks it up.*]

GERALD

Hallo, mother, whose glove is this? You have had a visitor. Who was it?

MRS. ARBUTHNOT

[*Turning round.*] Oh! no one. No one in particular. A man of no importance.

CURTAIN.

An Ideal Husband.

THE PERSONS OF THE PLAY.

THE EARL OF CAVERSHAM, K.G.

VISCOUNT GORING, his Son

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN, Bart., Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs

VICOMTE DE NANJAC, Attaché at the French Embassy in London

MR. MONTFORD

MASON, Butler to Sir Robert Chiltern

PHIPPS, Lord Goring's Servant

HAROLD, JAMES } footmen

LADY CHILTERN

LADY MARKBY

THE COUNTESS OF BASILDON

MRS. MARCHMONT

MISS MABEL CHILTERN, Sir Robert Chiltern's Sister

MRS. CHEVELEY

THE SCENES OF THE PLAY.

ACT I *The Octagon Room in Sir Robert Chiltern's House in Grosvenor Square.*

ACT II *Morning-room in Sir Robert Chiltern's House.*

ACT III *The Library of Lord Goring's House in Curzon Street.*

ACT IV *Same as Act II.*

Time

The Present.

Place

London.

The Action of the Play is completed within twenty-four hours.

FIRST ACT.

SCENE—*The octagon room at Sir Robert Chiltern's house in Grosvenor Square.*

[*The room is brilliantly lighted and full of guests. At the top of the staircase stands Lady Chiltern, a woman of grave Greek beauty, about twenty-seven years of age. She receives the guests as they come up. Over the well of the staircase hangs a great chandelier with wax lights, which illumine a large eighteenth-century French tapestry—representing the Triumph of Love, from a design by Boucher—that is stretched on the staircase wall. On the right is the entrance to the music-room. The sound of a string quartette is faintly heard. The entrance on the left leads to other reception-rooms. Mrs. Marchmont and Lady Basildon, two very pretty women, are seated together on a Louis Seize sofa. They are types of exquisite*

fragility. Their affectation of manner has a delicate charm. Watteau would have loved to paint them.]

MRS. MARCHMONT

Going on to the Hartlocks' to-night, Margaret?

LADY BASILDON

I suppose so. Are you?

MRS. MARCHMONT

Yes. Horribly tedious parties they give, don't they?

LADY BASILDON

Horribly tedious! Never know why I go. Never know why I go anywhere.

MRS. MARCHMONT

I come here to be educated.

LADY BASILDON

Ah! I hate being educated.

MRS. MARCHMONT

So do I. It puts one almost on a level with the commercial classes, doesn't it? But dear Gertrude Chiltern is always telling me that I

should have some serious purpose in life. So I come here to try to find one.

LADY BASILDON

[*Looking round through her lorgnette.*] I don't see anybody here to-night whom one could possibly call a serious purpose. The man who took me in to dinner talked to me about his wife the whole time.

MRS. MARCHMONT

How very trivial of him!

LADY BASILDON

Terribly trivial! What did your man talk about?

MRS. MARCHMONT

About myself.

LADY BASILDON

[*Languidly.*] And were you interested?

MRS. MARCHMONT

[*Shaking her head.*] Not in the smallest degree.

LADY BASILDON

What martyrs we are, dear Margaret!

MRS. MARCHMONT

[*Rising.*] And how well it becomes us, Olivia!

[*They rise and go towards the music-room. The Vicomte de Nanjac, a young attaché known for his neckties and his Anglomania, approaches with a low bow, and enters into conversation.*]

MASON

[*Announcing guests from the top of the staircase.*] Mr. and Lady Jane Barford. Lord Caversham.

[*Enter Lord Caversham, an old gentleman of seventy, wearing the riband and star of the Garter. A fine Whig type. Rather like a portrait by Lawrence.*]

LORD CAVERSHAM

Good evening, Lady Chiltern! Has my good-for-nothing young son been here?

LADY CHILTERN

[*Smiling.*] I don't think Lord Goring has arrived yet.

MABEL CHILTERN

[*Coming up to Lord Caversham.*] Why do you call Lord Goring good-for-nothing?

[*Mabel Chiltern is a perfect example of the English type of prettiness, the apple-blossom type. She has all the fragrance and freedom of a flower. There is ripple after ripple of sunlight in her hair, and the little mouth, with its parted lips, is expectant, like the mouth of a child. She has the fascinating tyranny of youth, and the astonishing courage of innocence. To sane people she is not reminiscent of any work of art. But she is really like a Tanagra statuette, and would be rather annoyed if she were told so.*]

LORD CAVERSHAM

Because he leads such an idle life.

MABEL CHILTERN

How can you say such a thing? Why, he rides in the Row at ten o'clock in the morning, goes to the Opera three times a week, changes his clothes at least five times a day, and dines out every night of the season. You don't call that leading an idle life, do you?

LORD CAVERSHAM

[*Looking at her with a kindly twinkle in his eyes.*] You are a very charming young lady!

MABEL CHILTERN

How sweet of you to say that, Lord Caversham. Do come to us more often. You know we are always at home on Wednesdays, and you look so well with your star!

LORD CAVERSHAM

Never go anywhere now. Sick of London Society. Shouldn't mind being introduced to my own tailor; he always votes on the right side. But object strongly to being sent down to dinner with my wife's milliner. Never could stand Lady Caversham's bonnets!

LADY CHILTERN

Oh, I love London Society! I think it has immensely improved. It is entirely composed now of beautiful idiots and brilliant lunatics. Just what Society should be.

LORD CAVERSHAM

Hum! Which is Goring? Beautiful idiot, or the other thing?

MABEL CHILTERN

[*Gravely.*] I have been obliged for the present to put Lord Goring into a class quite by himself. But he is developing charmingly.

LORD CAVERSHAM

Into what?

MABEL CHILTERN

[*With a little curtsey.*] I hope to let you know very soon, Lord Caversham!

MASON

[*Announcing guests.*] Lady Markby. Mrs. Cheveley.

[*Enter Lady Markby and Mrs. Cheveley. Lady Markby is a pleasant, kindly, popular woman, with gray hair à la marquise and good lace. Mrs. Cheveley, who accompanies her, is tall and rather slight. Lips very thin and highly coloured, a line of scarlet on a pallid face. Venetian red hair, aquiline nose, and long throat. Rouge accentuates the natural paleness of her complexion. Gray-green eyes that move restlessly. She is in heliotrope, with diamonds. She looks rather like an orchid, and makes great demands on one's curiosity. A work of art, on the whole, but showing the influence of too many schools.*]

LADY MARKBY

Good evening, dear Gertrude! So kind of you to let me bring my friend, Mrs. Cheveley.

Two such charming women should know each other!

LADY CHILTERN

[*Advances towards Mrs. Cheveley with a sweet smile. Then suddenly stops, and bows rather distantly.*] I think Mrs. Cheveley and I have met before. I did not know she had married a second time.

LADY MARKBY

[*Genially.*] Ah, nowadays people marry as often as they can, don't they? It is most fashionable. [*To Duchess of Maryborough.*] Dear Duchess, and how is the Duke? Brain still weak, I suppose? Well, that is only to be expected, is it not? His good father was just the same. There is nothing like race, is there?

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Playing with her fan.*] But have we really met before, Lady Chiltern? I can't remember where. I have been out of England for so long.

LADY CHILTERN

We were at school together, Mrs. Cheveley.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Superciliously.*] Indeed? I have forgotten all about my schooldays. I have a vague impression that they were detestable.

LADY CHILTERN

[*Coldly.*] I am not surprised!

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*In her sweetest manner.*] Do you know, I am quite looking forward to meeting your clever husband, Lady Chiltern. Since he has been at the Foreign Office, he has been so much talked of in Vienna. They actually succeed in spelling his name right in the newspapers. That in itself is fame, on the continent.

LADY CHILTERN

I hardly think there will be much in common between you and my husband, Mrs. Cheveley. [*Moves away.*]

VICOMTE DE NANJAC

Ah! chère Madame, quelle surprise! I have not seen you since Berlin!

MRS. CHEVELEY

Not since Berlin, Vicomte. Five years ago!

VICOMTE DE NANJAC

And you are younger and more beautiful than ever. How do you manage it?

MRS. CHEVELEY

By making it a rule only to talk to perfectly charming people like yourself.

VICOMTE DE NANJAC

Ah! you flatter me. You butter me, as they say here.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Do they say that here? How dreadful of them!

VICOMTE DE NANJAC

Yes, they have a wonderful language. It should be more widely known.

[*Sir Robert Chiltern enters. A man of forty, but looking somewhat younger. Clean-shaven, with finely-cut features, dark-haired and dark-eyed. A personality of mark. Not popular—few personalities are. But intensely admired by the few, and deeply respected by the many. The note of his manner that of perfect distinction, with a slight touch of pride. One feels that he is conscious of the success he has made*

in life. A nervous temperament, with a tired look. The firmly-chiselled mouth and chin contrast strikingly with the romantic expression in the deep-set eyes. The variance is suggestive of an almost complete separation of passion and intellect, as though thought and emotion were each isolated in its own sphere through some violence of will-power. There is nervousness in the nostrils, and in the pale, thin, pointed hands. It would be inaccurate to call him picturesque. Picturesqueness cannot survive the House of Commons. But Vandyck would have liked to have painted his head.]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Good evening, Lady Markby! I hope you have brought Sir John with you?

LADY MARKBY

Oh! I have brought a much more charming person than Sir John. Sir John's temper since he has taken seriously to politics has become quite unbearable. Really, now that the House of Commons is trying to become useful, it does a great deal of harm.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I hope not, Lady Markby. At any rate we

do our best to waste the public time, don't we? But who is this charming person you have been kind enough to bring to us?

LADY MARKBY

Her name is Mrs. Cheveley! One of the Dorsetshire Cheveleys, I suppose. But I really don't know. Families are so mixed nowadays. Indeed, as a rule, everybody turns out to be somebody else.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Mrs. Cheveley? I seem to know the name.

LADY MARKBY

She has just arrived from Vienna.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Ah! yes. I think I know whom you mean.

LADY MARKBY

Oh! she goes everywhere there, and has such pleasant scandals about all her friends. I really must go to Vienna next winter. I hope there is a good chef at the Embassy.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

If there is not, the Ambassador will certainly

have to be recalled. Pray point out Mrs. Cheveley to me. I should like to see her.

LADY MARKBY

Let me introduce you. [*To Mrs. Cheveley.*] My dear, Sir Robert is dying to know you.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Bowing.*] Everyone is dying to know the brilliant Mrs. Cheveley. Our attachés at Vienna write to us about nothing else.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Thank you, Sir Robert. An acquaintance that begins with a compliment is sure to develop into a real friendship. It starts in the right manner. And I find that I know Lady Chiltern already.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Really?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Yes. She has just reminded me that we were at school together. I remember it perfectly now. She always got the good conduct prize. I have a distinct recollection of Lady Chiltern always getting the good conduct prize!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Smiling.*] And what prizes did you get, Mrs. Cheveley?

MRS. CHEVELEY

My prizes came a little later on in life. I don't think any of them were for good conduct. I forget!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I am sure they were for something charming!

MRS. CHEVELEY

I don't know that women are always rewarded for being charming. I think they are usually punished for it! Certainly, more women grow old nowadays through the faithfulness of their admirers than through anything else! At least that is the only way I can account for the terribly haggard look of most of your pretty women in London!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

What an appalling philosophy that sounds! To attempt to classify you, Mrs. Cheveley, would be an impertinence. But may I ask, at heart, are you an optimist or a pessimist? Those

seem to be the only two fashionable religions left to us nowadays.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Oh, I'm neither. Optimism begins in a broad grin, and Pessimism ends with blue spectacles. Besides, they are both of them merely poses.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

You prefer to be natural?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Sometimes. But it is such a very difficult pose to keep up.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

What would those modern psychological novelists, of whom we hear so much, say to such a theory as that?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Ah! the strength of women comes from the fact that psychology cannot explain us. Men can be analyzed, women . . . merely adored.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

You think science cannot grapple with the problem of women?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Science can never grapple with the irrational. That is why it has no future before it, in this world.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

And women represent the irrational.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Well-dressed women do.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*With a polite bow.*] I fear I could hardly agree with you there. But do sit down. And now tell me, what makes you leave your brilliant Vienna for our bloomy London—or perhaps the question is indiscreet?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Questions are never indiscreet. Answers sometimes are.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Well, at any rate, may I know if it is politics or pleasure?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Politics are my only pleasure. You see nowadays it is not fashionable to flirt till one is

forty, or to be romantic till one is forty-five, so we poor women who are under thirty, or say we are, have nothing open to us but politics or philanthropy. And philanthropy seems to me to have become simply the refuge of people who wish to annoy their fellow-creatures. I prefer politics. I think they are more . . . becoming!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

A political life is a noble career!

MRS. CHEVELEY

Sometimes. And sometimes it is a clever game, Sir Robert. And sometimes it is a great nuisance.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Which do you find it?

MRS. CHEVELEY

I? A combination of all three. [*Drops her fan.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Picks up fan.*] Allow me!

MRS. CHEVELEY

Thanks.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

But you have not told me yet what makes you honour London so suddenly. Our season is almost over.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Oh! I don't care about the London season! It is too matrimonial. People are either hunting for husbands, or hiding from them. I wanted to meet you. It is quite true. You know what a woman's curiosity is. Almost as great as a man's! I wanted immensely to meet you, and . . . to ask you to do something for me.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I hope it is not a little thing, Mrs. Cheveley. I find that little things are so very difficult to do.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*After a moment's reflection.*] No, I don't think it is quite a little thing.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I am so glad. Do tell me what it is.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Later on. [*Rises.*] And now may I walk through your beautiful house? I hear your pictures are charming. Poor Baron Arnheim—you remember the Baron?—used to tell me you had some wonderful Corots.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*With an almost imperceptible start.*] Did you know Baron Arnheim well?

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Smiling.*] Intimately. Did you?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

At one time.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Wonderful man, wasn't he?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*After a pause.*] He was very remarkable, in many ways.

MRS. CHEVELEY

I often think it such a pity he never wrote his memoirs. They would have been most interesting.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Yes: he knew men and cities well, like the old Greek.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Without the dreadful disadvantage of having a Penelope waiting at home for him.

MASON

Lord Goring.

[*Enter Lord Goring. Thirty-four, but always says he is younger. A well-bred, expressionless face. He is clever, but would not like to be thought so. A flawless dandy, he would be annoyed if he were considered romantic. He plays with life, and is on perfectly good terms with the world. He is fond of being misunderstood. It gives him a post of vantage.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Good evening, my dear Arthur! Mrs. Cheveley, allow me to introduce to you Lord Goring, the idlest man in London.

MRS. CHEVELEY

I have met Lord Goring before.

LORD GORING

[*Bowing.*] I did not think you would remember me, Mrs. Cheveley.

MRS. CHEVELEY

My memory is under admirable control. And are you still a bachelor?

LORD GORING

I . . . believe so.

MRS. CHEVELEY

How very romantic!

LORD GORING

Oh! I am not at all romantic. I am not old enough. I leave romance to my seniors.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Lord Goring is the result of Boodle's Club, Mrs. Cheveley.

MRS. CHEVELEY

He reflects every credit on the institution.

LORD GORING

May I ask are you staying in London long?

MRS. CHEVELEY

That depends partly on the weather, partly on the cooking, and partly on Sir Robert.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

You are not going to plunge us into a European war, I hope?

MRS. CHEVELEY

There is no danger, at present!

[*She nods to Lord Goring, with a look of amusement in her eyes, and goes out with Sir Robert Chiltern. Lord Goring saunters over to Mabel Chiltern.*]

MABEL CHILTERN

You are very late!

LORD GORING

Have you missed me?

MABEL CHILTERN

Awfully!

LORD GORING

Then I am sorry I did not stay away longer. I like being missed.

MABEL CHILTERN

How very selfish of you!

LORD GORING

I am very selfish.

MABEL CHILTERN

You are always telling me of your bad qualities, Lord Goring.

LORD GORING

I have only told you half of them as yet, Miss Mabel!

MABEL CHILTERN

Are the others very bad?

LORD GORING

Quite dreadful! When I think of them at night I go to sleep at once.

MABEL CHILTERN

Well, I delight in your bad qualities. I wouldn't have you part with one of them.

LORD GORING

How very nice of you! But then you are always nice. By the way, I want to ask you a question, Miss Mabel. Who brought Mrs.

Cheveley here? That woman in heliotrope, who has just gone out of the room with your brother?

MABEL CHILTERN

Oh, I think Lady Markby brought her. Why do you ask?

LORD GORING

I hadn't seen her for years, that is all.

MABEL CHILTERN

What an absurd reason!

LORD GORING

All reasons are absurd.

MABEL CHILTERN

What sort of woman is she?

LORD GORING

Oh! a genius in the daytime and a beauty at night!

MABEL CHILTERN

I dislike her already.

LORD GORING

That shows your admirable good taste.

VICOMTE DE NANJAC

[*Approaching.*] Ah, the English young lady is the dragon of good taste, is she not? Quite the dragon of good taste.

LORD GORING

So the newspapers are always telling us.

VICOMTE DE NANJAC

I read all your English newspapers. I find them so amusing.

LORD GORING

Then, my dear Nanjac, you must certainly read between the lines.

VICOMTE DE NANJAC

I should like to, but my professor objects. [*To Mabel Chiltern.*] May I have the pleasure of escorting you to the music-room, Mademoiselle?

MABEL CHILTERN

[*Looking very disappointed.*] Delighted, Vicomte, quite delighted! [*Turning to Lord Goring.*] Aren't you coming to the music-room?

LORD GORING

Not if there is any music going on, Miss Mabel.

MABEL CHILTERN

[*Severely.*] The music is in German. You would not understand it.

[*Goes out with the Vicomte de Nanjac. Lord Caversham comes up to his son.*]

LORD CAVERSHAM

Well, sir! what are you doing here? Wasting your life as usual! You should be in bed, sir. You keep too late hours! I heard of you the other night at Lady Rufford's dancing till four o'clock in the morning!

LORD GORING

Only a quarter to four, father.

LORD CAVERSHAM

Can't make out how you stand London Society. The thing has gone to the dogs, a lot of damned nobodies talking about nothing.

LORD GORING

I love talking about nothing, father. It is the only thing I know anything about.

LORD CAVERSHAM

You seem to me to be living entirely for pleasure.

LORD GORING

What else is there to live for, father? Nothing ages like happiness.

LORD CAVERSHAM

You are heartless, sir, very heartless!

LORD GORING

I hope not, father. Good evening, Lady Basildon!

LADY BASILDON

[*Arching two pretty eyebrows.*] Are you here? I had no idea you ever came to political parties!

LORD GORING

I adore political parties. They are the only place left to us where people don't talk politics.

LADY BASILDON

I delight in talking politics. I talk them all day long. But I can't bear listening to them. I don't know how the unfortunate men in the House stand these long debates.

LORD GORING

By never listening.

LADY BASILDON

Really?

LORD GORING

[*In his most serious manner.*] Of course. You see, it is a very dangerous thing to listen. If one listens one may be convinced; and a man who allows himself to be convinced by an argument is a thoroughly unreasonable person.

LADY BASILDON

Ah! that accounts for so much in men that I have never understood, and so much in women that their husbands never appreciate in them!

MRS. MARCHMONT

[*With a sigh.*] Our husbands never appreciate anything in us. We have to go to others for that!

LADY BASILDON

[*Emphatically.*] Yes, always to others, have we not?

LORD GORING

[*Smiling.*] And those are the views of the

two ladies who are known to have the most admirable husbands in London.

MRS. MARCHMONT

That is exactly what we can't stand. My Reginald is quite hopelessly faultless. He is really unendurably so, at times! There is not the smallest element of excitement in knowing him.

LORD GORING

How terrible! Really, the thing should be more widely known!

LADY BASILDON

Basildon is quite as bad; he is as domestic as if he was a bachelor.

MRS. MARCHMONT

[*Pressing Lady Basildon's hand.*] My poor Olivia! We have married perfect husbands, and we are well punished for it.

LORD GORING

I should have thought it was the husbands who were punished.

MRS. MARCHMONT

[*Drawing herself up.*] Oh, dear, no! They

are as happy as possible! And as for trusting us, it is tragic how much they trust us.

LADY BASILDON

Perfectly tragic!

LORD GORING

Or comic, Lady Basildon?

LADY BASILDON

Certainly not comic, Lord Goring. How unkind of you to suggest such a thing!

MRS. MARCHMONT

I am afraid Lord Goring is in the camp of the enemy, as usual. I saw him talking to that Mrs. Cheveley when he came in.

LORD GORING

Handsome woman, Mrs. Cheveley!

LADY BASILDON

[*Stiffly.*] Please don't praise other women in our presence. You might wait for us to do that!

LORD GORING

I did wait.

MRS. MARCHMONT

Well, we are not going to praise her. I hear she went to the Opera on Monday night, and told Tommy Rufford at supper that, as far as she could see, London Society was entirely made up of dowdies and dandies.

LORD GORING

She is quite right, too. The men are all dowdies and the women are all dandies, aren't they? [*After a pause.*] Oh! do you really think that is what Mrs. Cheveley meant?

MRS. MARCHMONT

Of course. And a very sensible remark for Mrs. Cheveley to make, too.

[*Enter Mabel Chiltern. She joins the group.*]

MABEL CHILTERN

Why are you talking about Mrs. Cheveley? Everybody is talking about Mrs. Cheveley! Lord Goring says—what did you say, Lord Goring, about Mrs. Cheveley? Oh! I remember, that she was a genius in the daytime and a beauty at night.

LADY BASILDON

What a horrid combination! So very unnatural!

MRS. MARCHMONT

[*In her most dreamy manner.*] I like looking at geniuses, and listening to beautiful people.

LORD GORING

Ah! that is morbid of you, Mrs. Marchmont!

MRS. MARCHMONT

[*Brightening to a look of real pleasure.*] I am so glad to hear you say that. Marchmont and I have been married for seven years, and he has never once told me that I was morbid. Men are so painfully unobservant!

LADY BASILDON

[*Turning to her.*] I have always said, dear Margaret, that you were the most morbid person in London.

MRS. MARCHMONT

Ah! but you are always sympathetic, Olivia!

MABEL CHILTERN

Is it morbid to have a desire for food? I have

a great desire for food. Lord Goring, will you give me some supper?

LORD GORING

With pleasure, Miss Mabel. [*Moves away with her.*]

MABEL CHILTERN

How horrid you have been! You have never talked to me the whole evening!

LORD GORING

How could I? You went away with the child-diplomatist.

MABEL CHILTERN

You might have followed us. Pursuit would have been only polite. I don't think I like you at all this evening!

LORD GORING

I like you immensely.

MABEL CHILTERN

Well, I wish you'd show it in a more marked way! [*They go downstairs.*]

MRS. MARCHMONT

Olivia, I have a curious feeling of absolute

faintness. I think I should like some supper very much. I know I should like some supper.

LADY BASILDON

I am positively dying for supper, Margaret!

MRS. MARCHMONT

Men are so horribly selfish, they never think of these things.

LADY BASILDON

Men are grossly material, grossly material!

[*The Vicomte de Nanjac enters from the music-room with some other guests. After having carefully examined all the people present, he approaches Lady Basildon.*]

VICOMTE DE NANJAC

May I have the honour of taking you down to supper, Comtesse?

LADY BASILDON

[*Coldly.*] I never take supper, thank you, Vicomte. [*The Vicomte is about to retire. Lady Basildon, seeing this, rises at once and takes his arm.*] But I will come down with you with pleasure.

VICOMTE DE NANJAC

I am so fond of eating! I am very English in all my tastes.

LADY BASILDON

You look quite English, Vicomte, quite English.

[*They pass out. Mr. Montford, a perfectly-groomed young dandy, approaches Mrs. Marchmont.*]

MR. MONTFORD

Like some supper, Mrs. Marchmont?

MRS. MARCHMONT

[*Languidly.*] Thank you, Mr. Montford, I never touch supper. [*Rises hastily and takes his arm.*] But I will sit beside you, and watch you.

MR. MONTFORD

I don't know that I like being watched when I am eating!

MRS. MARCHMONT

Then I will watch some one else.

MR. MONTFORD

I don't know that I should like that either.

MRS. MARCHMONT

[*Severely.*] Pray, Mr. Montford, do not make these painful scenes of jealousy in public!

[*They go downstairs with the other guests, passing Sir Robert Chiltern and Mrs. Cheveley, who now enter.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

And are you going to any of our country houses before you leave England, Mrs. Cheveley?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Oh, no! I can't stand your English house-parties. In England people actually try to be brilliant at breakfast. That is so dreadful of them! Only dull people are brilliant at breakfast. And then the family skeleton is always reading family prayers. My stay in England really depends on you, Sir Robert. [*Sits down on the sofa.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Taking a seat beside her.*] Seriously?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Quite seriously. I want to talk to you about a great political and financial scheme, about this Argentine Canal Company, in fact.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

What a tedious, practical subject for you to talk about, Mrs. Cheveley!

MRS. CHEVELEY

Oh, I like tedious, practical subjects. What I don't like are tedious, practical people. There is a wide difference. Besides, you are interested, I know, in International Canal schemes. You were Lord Radley's secretary, weren't you, when the Government bought the Suez Canal shares?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Yes. But the Suez Canal was a very great and splendid undertaking. It gave us our direct route to India. It had imperial value. It was necessary that we should have control. This Argentine scheme is a commonplace Stock Exchange swindle.

MRS. CHEVELEY

A speculation, Sir Robert! A brilliant, daring speculation.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Believe me, Mrs. Cheveley, it is a swindle. Let us call things by their proper names. It makes matters simpler. We have all the information about it at the Foreign Office. In fact, I sent out a special Commission to inquire into the matter privately, and they report that the works are hardly begun, and as for the money already subscribed, no one seems to know what has become of it. The whole thing is a second Panama, and with not a quarter of the chance of success that miserable affair ever had. I hope you have not invested in it. I am sure you are far too clever to have done that.

MRS. CHEVELEY

I have invested very largely in it.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Who could have advised you to do such a foolish thing?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Your old friend—and mine.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Who?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Baron Arnheim.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Frowning.*] Ah! yes. I remember hearing, at the time of his death, that he had been mixed up in the whole affair.

MRS. CHEVELEY

It was his last romance. His last but one, to do him justice.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Rising.*] But you have not seen my Corots yet. They are in the music-room. Corots seem to go with music, don't they? May I show them to you?

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Shaking her head.*] I am not in a mood to-night for silver twilights, or rose-pink dawns. I want to talk business. [*Motions to him with her fan to sit down again beside her.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I fear I have no advice to give you, Mrs. Cheveley, except to interest yourself in something less dangerous. The success of the Canal depends, of course, on the attitude of England, and I am going to lay the report of the Commissioners before the House to-morrow night.

MRS. CHEVELEY

That you must not do. In your own interests, Sir Robert, to say nothing of mine, you must not do that.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Looking at her in wonder.*] In my own interests? My dear Mrs. Cheveley, what do you mean? [*Sits down beside her.*]

MRS. CHEVELEY

Sir Robert, I will be quite frank with you. I want you to withdraw the report that you had intended to lay before the House, on the ground that you have reasons to believe that the Commissioners have been prejudiced or misinformed, or something. Then I want you to say a few words to the effect that the Government is going to reconsider the question, and

that you have reason to believe that the Canal, if completed, will be of great international value. You know the sort of things ministers say in cases of this kind. A few ordinary platitudes will do. In modern life nothing produces such an effect as a good platitude. It makes the whole world kin. Will you do that for me?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Mrs Cheveley, you cannot be serious in making me such a proposition!

MRS. CHEVELEY

I am quite serious.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Coldly.*] Pray allow me to believe that you are not!

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Speaking with great deliberation and emphasis.*] Ah! but I am. And, if you do what I ask you, I . . . will pay you very handsomely!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Pay me!

MRS. CHEVELEY

Yes.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I am afraid I don't quite understand what you mean.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Leaning back on the sofa and looking at him.*] How very disappointing! And I have come all the way from Vienna in order that you should thoroughly understand me.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I fear I don't.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*In her most nonchalant manner.*] My dear Sir Robert, you are a man of the world, and you have your price, I suppose. Everybody has nowadays. The drawback is that most people are so dreadfully expensive. I know I am. I hope you will be more reasonable in your terms.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Rises indignantly.*] If you will allow me, I will call your carriage for you. You have lived so long abroad, Mrs. Cheveley, that you

seem to be unable to realize that you are talking to an English gentleman.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Detains him by touching his arm with her fan, and keeping it there while she is talking.*] I realize that I am talking to a man who laid the foundation of his fortune by selling to a Stock Exchange speculator a Cabinet secret.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Biting his lip.*] What do you mean?

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Rising and facing him.*] I mean that I know the real origin of your wealth and your career, and I have got your letter, too.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

What letter?

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Contemptuously.*] The letter you wrote to Baron Arnheim, when you were Lord Radley's secretary, telling the Baron to buy Suez Canal shares—a letter written three days before the Government announced its own purchase.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Hoarsely.*] It is not true.

MRS. CHEVELEY

You thought that letter had been destroyed. How foolish of you! It is in my possession.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

The affair to which you allude was no more than a speculation. The House of Commons had not yet passed the bill; it might have been rejected.

MRS. CHEVELEY

It was a swindle, Sir Robert. Let us call things by their proper names. It makes everything simpler. And now I am going to sell you that letter, and the price I ask for it is your public support of the Argentine scheme. You made your own fortune out of one canal. You must help me and my friends to make our fortunes out of another!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

It is infamous, what you propose—infamous!

MRS. CHEVELEY

Oh, no! This is the game of life as we all have to play it, Sir Robert, sooner or later.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I cannot do what you ask me.

MRS. CHEVELEY

You mean you cannot help doing it. You know you are standing on the edge of a precipice. And it is not for you to make terms. It is for you to accept them. Suppose you refuse——

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

What then?

MRS. CHEVELEY

My dear Sir Robert, what then! You are ruined, that is all! Remember to what a point your Puritanism in England has brought you. In old days nobody pretended to be a bit better than his neighbours. In fact, to be a bit better than one's neighbour was considered excessively vulgar and middle-class. Nowadays, with our modern mania for morality, everyone has to pose as a paragon of purity, incorruptibility,

and all the other seven deadly virtues—and what is the result? You all go over like nine-pins—one after the other. Not a year passes in England without somebody disappearing. Scandals used to lend charm, or at least interest, to a man—now they crush him. And yours is a very nasty scandal. You couldn't survive it. If it were known that as a young man, secretary to a great and important minister, you sold a Cabinet secret for a large sum of money, and that that was the origin of your wealth and career, you would be hounded out of public life, you would disappear completely. And after all, Sir Robert, why should you sacrifice your entire future rather than deal diplomatically with your enemy? For the moment I am your enemy. I admit it! And I am much stronger than you are. The big battalions are on my side. You have a splendid position, but it is your splendid position that makes you so vulnerable. You can't defend it. And I am in attack. Of course I have not talked morality to you. You must admit in fairness that I have spared you that. Years ago you did a clever, unscrupulous thing; it turned out a great success. You owe to it your fortune and position. And

now you have got to pay for it. Sooner or later we all have to pay for what we do. You have to pay now. Before I leave you to-night, you have got to promise me to suppress your report, and to speak in the House in favour of this scheme.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

What you ask is impossible.

MRS. CHEVELEY

You must make it possible. You are going to make it possible. Sir Robert, you know what your English newspapers are like. Suppose that when I leave this house I drive down to some newspaper office, and give them this scandal and the proofs of it! Think of their loathsome joy, of the delight they would have in dragging you down, of the mud and mire they would plunge you in. Think of the hypocrite with his greasy smile penning his leading article, and arranging the foulness of the public placard.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Stop! You want me to withdraw the report and to make a short speech stating that I believe there are possibilities in the scheme?

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Sitting down on the sofa.*] Those are my terms.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*In a low voice.*] I will give you any sum of money you want.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Even you are not rich enough, Sir Robert, to buy back your past. No man is.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I will not do what you ask me. I will not.

MRS. CHEVELEY

You have to. If you don't . . . [*Rises from the sofa.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Bewildered and unnerved.*] Wait a moment! What did you propose? You said that you would give me back my letter, didn't you?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Yes. That is agreed. I will be in the Ladies' Gallery to-morrow night at half-past eleven. If by that time—and you will have had heaps of opportunity—you have made an announcement to the House in the terms I wish, I shall hand

you back your letter with the prettiest thanks, and the best, or at any rate the most suitable, compliment I can think of. I intend to play quite fairly with you. One should always play fairly . . . when one has the winning cards. The Baron taught me that . . . amongst other things.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

You must let me have time to consider your proposal.

MRS. CHEVELEY

No; you must settle now!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Give me a week—three days!

MRS. CHEVELEY

Impossible! I have got to telegraph to Vienna to-night.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

My God! what brought you into my life?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Circumstances. [*Moves towards the door.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Don't go. I consent. The report shall be withdrawn. I will arrange for a question to be put to me on the subject.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Thank you. I knew we should come to an amicable agreement. I understood your nature from the first. I analyzed you, though you did not adore me. And now you can get my carriage for me, Sir Robert. I see the people coming up from supper, and Englishmen always get romantic after a meal, and that bores me dreadfully.

[*Exit Sir Robert Chiltern.*]

[*Enter Guests, Lady Chiltern, Lady Markby, Lord Caversham, Lady Basildon, Mrs. Marchmont, Vicomte de Nanjac, Mr. Montford.*]

LADY MARKBY

Well, dear Mrs. Cheveley, I hope you have enjoyed yourself. Sir Robert is very entertaining, is he not?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Most entertaining! I have enjoyed my talk with him immensely.

LADY MARKBY

He has had a very interesting and brilliant career. And he has married a most admirable wife. Lady Chiltern is a woman of the very highest principles, I am glad to say. I am a little too old now, myself, to trouble about setting a good example, but I always admire people who do. And Lady Chiltern has a very ennobling effect on life, though her dinner-parties are rather dull sometimes. But one can't have everything, can one? And now I must go, dear. Shall I call for you to-morrow?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Thanks.

LADY MARKBY

We might drive in the Park at five. Everything looks so fresh in the Park now!

MRS. CHEVELEY

Except the people!

LADY MARKBY

Perhaps the people are a little jaded. I have often observed that the Season as it goes on produces a kind of softening of the brain. How-

ever, I think anything is better than high intellectual pressure. That is the most unbecoming thing there is. It makes the noses of the young girls so particularly large. And there is nothing so difficult to marry as a large nose, men don't like them. Good-night, dear! [*To Lady Chiltern.*] Good-night, Gertrude! [*Goes out on Lord Caversham's arm.*]

MRS. CHEVELEY

What a charming house you have, Lady Chiltern! I have spent a delightful evening. It has been so interesting getting to know your husband.

LADY CHILTERN

Why did you wish to meet my husband, Mrs. Cheveley?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Oh, I will tell you. I wanted to interest him in this Argentine Canal scheme, of which I dare say you have heard. And I found him most susceptible—susceptible to reason, I mean. A rare thing in a man. I converted him in ten minutes. He is going to make a speech in the House to-morrow night in favour of the idea.

We must go to the Ladies' Gallery and hear him! It will be a great occasion!

LADY CHILTERN

There must be some mistake. That scheme could never have my husband's support.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Oh, I assure you it's all settled. I don't regret my tedious journey from Vienna now. It has been a great success. But, of course, for the next twenty-four hours the whole thing is a dead secret.

LADY CHILTERN

[*Gently.*] A secret? Between whom?

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*With a flash of amusement in her eyes.*] Between your husband and myself.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Entering.*] Your carriage is here, Mrs. Cheveley!

MRS. CHEVELEY

Thanks! Good evening, Lady Chiltern!

Good-night, Lord Goring! I am at Claridge's. Don't you think you might leave a card?

LORD GORING

If you wish it, Mrs. Cheveley!

MRS. CHEVELEY

Oh, don't be so solemn about it, or I shall be obliged to leave a card on you. In England I suppose that would be hardly considered *en règle.* Abroad, we are more civilized. Will you see me down, Sir Robert? Now that we have both the same interests at heart we shall be great friends, I hope!

[*Sails out on Sir Robert Chiltern's arm. Lady Chiltern goes to the top of the staircase and looks down at them as they descend. Her expression is troubled. After a little time she is joined by some of the guests, and passes with them into another reception-room.*]

MABEL CHILTERN

What a horrid woman!

LORD GORING

You should go to bed, Miss Mabel.

MABEL CHILTERN

Lord Goring!

LORD GORING

My father told me to go to bed an hour ago. I don't see why I shouldn't give you the same advice. I always pass on good advice. It is the only thing to do with it. It is never of any use to oneself.

MABEL CHILTERN

Lord Goring, you are always ordering me out of the room. I think it most courageous of you. Especially as I am not going to bed for hours. [*Goes over to the sofa.*] You can come and sit down if you like, and talk about anything in the world, except the Royal Academy, Mrs. Cheveley, or novels in the Scotch dialect. They are not improving subjects. [*Catches sight of something that is lying on the sofa half-hidden by the cushion.*] What is this? Some one has dropped a diamond brooch! Quite beautiful, isn't it? [*Shows it to him.*] I wish it was mine, but Gertrude won't let me wear anything but pearls, and I am thoroughly sick of pearls. They make me look so plain, so good

and so intellectual. I wonder whom the brooch belongs to.

LORD GORING

I wonder who dropped it.

MABEL CHILTERN

It is a beautiful brooch.

LORD GORING

It is a handsome bracelet.

MABEL CHILTERN

It isn't a bracelet. It's a brooch.

LORD GORING

It can be used as a bracelet. [*Takes it from her, and, pulling out a green letter-case, puts the ornament carefully in it, and replaces the whole thing in his breast-pocket with the most perfect sangfroid.*]

MABEL CHILTERN

What are you doing?

LORD GORING

Miss Mabel, I am going to make a rather strange request to you.

MABEL CHILTERN

[*Eagerly.*] Oh, pray do! I have been waiting for it all the evening.

LORD GORING

[*Is a little taken aback, but recovers himself.*] Don't mention to anybody that I have taken charge of this brooch. Should anyone write and claim it, let me know at once.

MABEL CHILTERN

That is a strange request.

LORD GORING

Well, you see I gave this brooch to somebody once, years ago.

MABEL CHILTERN

You did?

LORD GORING

Yes.

[*Lady Chiltern enters alone. The other guests have gone.*]

MABEL CHILTERN

Then I shall certainly bid you good-night. Good-night, Gertrude! [*Exit.*]

LADY CHILTERN

Good-night, dear! [*To Lord Goring.*] You saw whom Lady Markby brought here to-night.

LORD GORING

Yes. It was an unpleasant surprise. What did she come here for?

LADY CHILTERN

Apparently to try and lure Robert to uphold some fraudulent scheme in which she is interested. The Argentine Canal, in fact.

LORD GORING

She has mistaken her man, hasn't she?

LADY CHILTERN

She is incapable of understanding an upright nature like my husband's!

LORD GORING

Yes. I should fancy she came to grief if she tried to get Robert into her toils. It is extraordinary what astounding mistakes clever women make.

LADY CHILTERN

I don't call women of that kind clever. I call them stupid!

LORD GORING

Same thing often. Good-night, Lady Chiltern!

LADY CHILTERN

Good-night!

[*Enter Sir Robert Chiltern.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

My dear Arthur, you are not going? Do stop a little!

LORD GORING

Afraid I can't, thanks. I have promised to look in at the Hartlocks. I believe they have got a mauve Hungarian band that plays mauve Hungarian music. See you soon. Good-bye!

[*Exit.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

How beautiful you look to-night, Gertrude!

LADY CHILTERN

Robert, it is not true, is it? You are not going to lend your support to this Argentine speculation? You couldn't!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Starting.*] Who told you I intended to do so?

LADY CHILTERN

That woman who has just gone out, Mrs. Cheveley, as she calls herself now. She seemed to taunt me with it. Robert, I know this woman. You don't. We were at school together. She was untruthful, dishonest, an evil influence on everyone whose trust or friendship she could win. I hated, I despised her. She stole things, she was a thief. She was sent away for being a thief. Why do you let her influence you?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Gertrude, what you tell me may be true, but it happened many years ago. It is best forgotten! Mrs. Cheveley may have changed since then. No one should be entirely judged by their past.

LADY CHILTERN

[*Sadly.*] One's past is what one is. It is the only way by which people should be judged.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

That is a hard saying, Gertrude!

LADY CHILTERN

It is a true saying, Robert. And what did she mean by boasting that she had got you to lend your support, your name to a thing I have heard you describe as the most dishonest and fraudulent scheme there has ever been in political life?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Biting his lip.*] I was mistaken in the view I took. We all may make mistakes.

LADY CHILTERN

But you told me yesterday that you had received the report from the Commission, and that it entirely condemned the whole thing.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Walking up and down.*] I have reasons now to believe that the Commission was prejudiced, or, at any rate, misinformed. Besides, Gertrude, public and private life are different things. They have different laws and move on different lines.

LADY CHILTERN

They should both represent man at his highest. I see no difference between them.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Stopping.*] In the present case, on a matter of practical politics, I have changed my mind. That is all.

LADY CHILTERN

All!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Sternly.*] Yes!

LADY CHILTERN

Robert! Oh! it is horrible that I should have to ask you such a question—Robert, are you telling me the whole truth?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Why do you ask me such a question?

LADY CHILTERN

[*After a pause.*] Why do you not answer it?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Sitting down.*] Gertrude, truth is a very complex thing, and politics is a very complex business. There are wheels within wheels. One may be under certain obligations to people that one must pay. Sooner or later in political life one has to compromise. Everyone does.

LADY CHILTERN

Compromise? Robert, why do you talk so differently to-night from the way I have always heard you talk? Why are you changed?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I am not changed. But circumstances alter things.

LADY CHILTERN

Circumstances should never alter principles.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

But if I told you——

LADY CHILTERN

What?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

That it was necessary, vitally necessary.

LADY CHILTERN

It can never be necessary to do what is not honourable. Or if it be necessary, then what is it that I have loved! But it is not, Robert; tell me it is not. Why should it be? What gain would you get? Money? We have no need of that! And money that comes from a tainted

source is a degradation. Power? But power is nothing in itself. It is power to do good that is fine—that, and that only. What is it, then? Robert, tell me why you are going to do this dishonourable thing!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Gertrude, you have no right to use that word. I told you it was a question of rational compromise. It is no more than that.

LADY CHILTERN

Robert, that is all very well for other men, for men who treat life simply as a sordid speculation; but not for you, Robert, not for you. You are different. All your life you have stood apart from others. You have never let the world soil you. To the world, as to myself, you have been an ideal always. Oh! be that ideal still. That great inheritance throw not away—that tower of ivory do not destroy. Robert, men can love what is beneath them—things unworthy, stained, dishonoured. We women worship when we love; and when we lose our worship, we lose everything. Oh! don't kill my love for you, don't kill that!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Gertrude!

LADY CHILTERN

I know that there are men with horrible secrets in their lives—men who have done some shameful thing, and who in some critical moment have to pay for it, by doing some other act of shame—oh! don't tell me you are such as they are! Robert, is there in your life any secret dishonour or disgrace? Tell me, tell me at once, that——

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

That what?

LADY CHILTERN

[*Speaking very slowly.*] That our lives may drift apart. .

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Drift apart?

LADY CHILTERN

That they may be entirely separate. It would be better for us both.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Gertrude, there is nothing in my past life that you might not know.

LADY CHILTERN

I was sure of it, Robert. I was sure of it. But why did you say those dreadful things, things so unlike your real self? Don't let us ever talk about the subject again. You will write, won't you, to Mrs. Cheveley, and tell her that you cannot support this scandalous scheme of hers? If you have given her any promise you must take it back, that is all!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Must I write and tell her that?

LADY CHILTERN

Surely, Robert! What else is there to do?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I might see her personally. It would be better.

LADY CHILTERN

You must never see her again, Robert. She is not a woman you should ever speak to. She is not worthy to talk to a man like you. No;

you must write to her at once, now, this moment, and let your letter show her that your decision is quite irrevocable!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Write this moment!

LADY CHILTERN

Yes.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

But it is so late. It is close on twelve.

LADY CHILTERN

That makes no matter. She must know at once that she has been mistaken in you—and that you are not a man to do anything base or underhand or dishonourable. Write her, Robert. Write that you decline to support this scheme of hers, as you hold it to be a dishonest scheme. Yes—write the word dishonest. She knows what that word means. [*Sir Robert Chiltern sits down and writes a letter. His wife takes it up and reads it.*] Yes; that will do. [*Rings bell.*] And now the envelope. [*He writes the envelope slowly. Enter Mason.*] Have this letter sent at once to Claridge's Hotel. There is no answer. [*Exit Mason. Lady Chiltern*

kneels down beside her husband and puts her arms round him.] Robert, love gives one a sort of instinct to things. I feel to-night that I have saved you from something that might have been a danger to you, from something that might have made men honour you less than they do. I don't think you realize sufficiently, Robert, that you have brought into the political life of our time a nobler atmosphere, a finer attitude towards life, a freer air of purer aims and higher ideals—I know it, and for that I love you, Robert.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Oh, love me always, Gertrude, love me always!

LADY CHILTERN

I will love you always, because you will always be worthy of love. We needs must love the highest when we see it! [*Kisses him and rises and goes out.*]

[*Sir Robert Chiltern walks up and down for a moment; then sits down and buries his face in his hands. The servant enters and begins putting out the lights. Sir Robert Chiltern looks up.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Put out the lights, Mason, put out the lights.

[*The Servant puts out the lights. The room becomes almost dark. The only light there is comes from the great chandelier that hangs over the staircase and illumes the tapestry of the Triumph of Love.*]

ACT-DROP.

SECOND ACT.

SCENE—*Morning-room at Sir Robert Chiltern's house.*

[*Lord Goring, dressed in the height of fashion, is lounging in an armchair. Sir Robert Chiltern is standing in front of the fireplace. He is evidently in a state of great mental excitement and distress. As the scene progresses he paces nervously up and down the room.*]

LORD GORING

My dear Robert, it's a very awkward business, very awkward indeed. You should have told your wife the whole thing. Secrets from other people's wives are a necessary luxury in modern life. So, at least, I am always told at the club by people who are bald enough to know better. But no man should have a secret from his own wife. She invariably finds it out. Wo-

men have a wonderful instinct about things. They can discover everything except the obvious.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Arthur, I couldn't tell my wife. When could I have told her? Not last night. It would have made a life-long separation between us, and I would have lost the love of the one woman in the world I worship, of the only woman who has ever stirred love within me. Last night it would have been quite impossible. She would have turned from me in horror . . . in horror and in contempt.

LORD GORING

Is Lady Chiltern as perfect as all that?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Yes; my wife is as perfect as all that.

LORD GORING

[*Taking off his left-hand glove.*] What a pity! I beg your pardon, my dear fellow, I didn't quite mean that. But if what you tell me is true, I should like to have a serious talk about life with Lady Chiltern.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

It would be quite useless.

LORD GORING

May I try?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Yes; but nothing could make her alter her views.

LORD GORING

Well, at the worst it would simply be a psychological experiment.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

All such experiments are terribly dangerous.

LORD GORING

Everything is dangerous, my dear fellow. If it wasn't so, life wouldn't be worth living. . . . Well, I am bound to say that I think you should have told her years ago.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

When? When we were engaged? Do you think she would have married me if she had known that the origin of my fortune is such as it is, the basis of my career such as it is, and

that I had done a thing that I suppose most men would call shameful and dishonourable?

LORD GORING

[*Slowly.*] Yes; most men would call it ugly names. There is no doubt of that.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Bitterly.*] Men who every day do something of the same kind themselves. Men who, each one of them, have worse secrets in their own lives.

LORD GORING

That is the reason they are so pleased to find out other people's secrets. It distracts public attention from their own.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

And, after all, whom did I wrong by what I did? No one.

LORD GORING

[*Looking at him steadily.*] Except yourself, Robert.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*After a pause.*] Of course I had private in-

formation about a certain transaction contemplated by the Government of the day, and I acted on it. Private information is practically the source of every large modern fortune.

LORD GORING

[*Tapping his boot with his cane.*] And public scandal invariably the result.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Pacing up and down the room.*] Arthur, do you think that what I did nearly eighteen years ago should be brought up against me now? Do you think it fair that a man's whole career should be ruined for a fault done in one's boyhood almost. I was twenty-two at the time, and I had the double misfortune of being well-born and poor, two unforgivable things nowadays. Is it fair that the folly, the sin of one's youth, if men choose to call it a sin, should wreck a life like mine, should place me in the pillory, should shatter all that I have worked for, all that I have built up? Is it fair, Arthur?

LORD GORING

Life is never fair, Robert. And perhaps it is a good thing for most of us that it is not.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Every man of ambition has to fight his century with its own weapons. What this century worships is wealth. To succeed one must achieve wealth. At all costs one must have wealth.

LORD GORING

You underrate yourself, Robert. Believe me, without wealth you could have succeeded just as well.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

When I was old, perhaps. When I had lost my passion for power, or could not use it. When I was tired, worn out, disappointed. I wanted my success when I was young. Youth is the time for success. I couldn't wait.

LORD GORING

Well, you certainly have had your success while you are still young. No one in our day has had such a brilliant success. Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs at the age of forty—that's good enough for anyone, I should think.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

And if it is all taken away from me now? If

I lose everything over a horrible scandal? If I am hounded from public life?

LORD GORING

Robert, how could you have sold yourself for money?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Excitedly.*] I did not sell myself for money. I bought success at a great price. That is all.

LORD GORING

[*Gravely.*] Yes; you certainly paid a great price for it. But what first made you think of doing such a thing?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Baron Arnheim.

LORD GORING

Damned scoundrel!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

No; he was a man of a most subtle and refined intellect. A man of culture, charm, and distinction. One of the most intellectual men I ever met.

LORD GORING

Ah! I prefer a gentlemanly fool any day. There is more to be said for stupidity than people imagine. Personally, I have a great admiration for stupidity. It is a sort of fellow-feeling, I suppose. But how did he do it? Tell me the whole thing.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Throws himself into an armchair by the writing-table.*] One night after dinner at Lord Radley's the Baron began talking about success in modern life as something that one could reduce to an absolutely definite science. With that wonderfully fascinating quiet voice of his he expounded to us the most terrible of all philosophies, the philosophy of power, preached to us the most marvellous of all gospels, the gospel of gold. I think he saw the effect he had produced on me, for some days afterward he wrote and asked me to come and see him. He was living then in Park Lane, in the house Lord Woolcomb has now. I remember so well how, with a strange smile on his pale curved lips, he led me through his wonderful picture gallery, showed me his tapestries, his enamels, his jewels, his carved ivories, made me wonder at the strange

loveliness of the luxury in which he lived; and then told me that luxury was nothing but a background, a painted scene in a play, and that power, power over other men, power over the world was the one thing worth having, the one supreme pleasure worth knowing, the one toy one never tired of, and that in our century only the rich possessed it.

LORD GORING

[*With great deliberation.*] A thoroughly shallow creed.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Rising.*] I didn't think so then. I don't think so now. Wealth has given me enormous power. It gave me at the very outset of my life freedom, and freedom is everything. You have never been poor, and never known what ambition is. You cannot understand what a wonderful chance the Baron gave me. Such a chance as few men get.

LORD GORING

Fortunately for them, if one is to judge by results. But tell me definitely, how did the Baron finally persuade you to—well, to do what you did?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

When I was going away he said to me that if I ever could give him any private information of real value he would make me a very rich man. I was dazed at the prospect he held out to me, and my ambition and my desire for power were at that time boundless. Six weeks later certain private documents passed through my hands.

LORD GORING

[*Keeping his eyes steadily fixed on the carpet.*] State documents?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Yes. [*Lord Goring sighs, then passes his hand across his forehead and looks up.*]

LORD GORING

I had no idea that you, of all men in the world, could have been so weak, Robert, as to yield to such a temptation as Baron Arnheim held out to you.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Weak? Oh, I am sick of hearing that phrase.

Sick of using it about others. Weak? Do you really think, Arthur, that it is weakness that yields to temptation? I tell you that there are terrible temptations that it requires strength, strength and courage, to yield to. To stake all one's life on a single moment, to risk everything on one throw, whether the stakes be power or pleasure, I care not—there is no weakness in that. There is a horrible, a terrible courage. I had that courage. I sat down the same afternoon and wrote Baron Arnheim the letter this woman now holds. He made three-quarters of a million over the transaction.

LORD GORING

And you?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I received from the Baron £110,000..

LORD GORING

You were worth more, Robert.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

No; that money gave me exactly what I wanted, power over others. I went into the House immediately. The Baron advised me in finance

from time to time. Before five years I had almost trebled my fortune. Since then everything that I have touched has turned out a success. In all things connected with money I have had a luck so extraordinary that sometimes it has made me almost afraid. I remember having read somewhere, in some strange book, that when the gods wish to punish us they answer our prayers.

LORD GORING

But tell me, Robert, did you never suffer any regret for what you had done?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

No. I felt that I had fought the century with its own weapons, and won.

LORD GORING

[*Sadly.*] You thought you had won.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I thought so. [*After a long pause.*] Arthur, do you despise me for what I have told you?

LORD GORING

[*With deep feeling in his voice.*] I am very sorry for you, Robert, very sorry indeed.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I don't say that I suffered any remorse. I didn't. Not remorse in the ordinary, rather silly sense of the word. But I have paid conscience money many times. I had a wild hope that I might disarm destiny. The sum Baron Arnheim gave me I have distributed twice over in public charities since then.

LORD GORING

[*Looking up.*] In public charities? Dear me! what a lot of harm you must have done, Robert?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Oh, don't say that, Arthur; don't talk like that.

LORD GORING

Never mind what I say, Robert. I am always saying what I shouldn't say. In fact, I usually say what I really think. A great mistake nowadays. It makes one so liable to be misunderstood. As regards this dreadful business, I will help you in whatever way I can. Of course you know that.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Thank you, Arthur, thank you. But what is to be done? What can be done?

LORD GORING

[*Leaning back with his hands in his pockets.*] Well, the English can't stand a man who is always saying he is in the right, but they are very fond of a man who admits that he has been in the wrong. It is one of the best things in them. However, in your case, Robert, a confession would not do. The money, if you will allow me to say so is . . . awkward. Besides, if you did make a clean breast of the whole affair, you would never be able to talk morality again. And in England a man who can't talk morality twice a week to a large, popular, immoral audience is quite over as a serious politician. There would be nothing left for him as a profession except Botany or the Church. A confession would be of no use. It would ruin you.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

It would ruin me. Arthur, the only thing for me to do now is to fight the thing out.

LORD GORING

[*Rising from his chair.*] I was waiting for

you to say that, Robert. It is the only thing to do now. And you must begin by telling your wife the whole story.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

That I will not do.

LORD GORING

Robert, believe me, you are wrong.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I couldn't do it. It would kill her love for me. And now about this woman, this Mrs. Cheveley. How can I defend myself against her? You knew her before, Arthur, apparently.

LORD GORING

Yes.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Did you know her well?

LORD GORING

[*Arranging his necktie.*] So little that I got engaged to be married to her once, when I was staying at the Tenbys'. The affair lasted for three days . . . nearly.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Why was it broken off?

LORD GORING

[*Airily.*] Oh, I forget. At least, it makes no matter. By the way, have you tried her with money? She used to be confoundedly fond of money.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I offered her any sum she wanted. She refused.

LORD GORING

Then the marvellous gospel of gold breaks down sometimes. The rich can't do everything, after all.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Not everything. I suppose you are right. Arthur, I feel that public disgrace is in store for me. I feel certain of it. I never knew what terror was before. I know it now. It is as if a hand of ice were laid upon one's heart. It is as if one's heart were beating itself to death in some empty hollow.

LORD GORING

[*Striking the table.*] Robert, you must fight her. You must fight her.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

But how?

LORD GORING

I can't tell you how, at present. I have not the smallest idea. But everyone has some weak point. There is some flaw in each one of us. [*Strolls over to the fireplace and looks at himself in the glass.*] My father tells me that even I have faults. Perhaps I have. I don't know.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

In defending myself against Mrs. Cheveley, I have a right to use any weapon I can find, have I not?

LORD GORING

[*Still looking in the glass.*] In your place I don't think I should have the smallest scruple in doing so. She is thoroughly well able to take care of herself.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Sits down at the table and takes a pen in his*

hand.] Well, I shall send a cipher telegram to the Embassy at Vienna, to inquire if there is anything known against her. There may be some secret scandal she might be afraid of.

LORD GORING

[*Settling his buttonhole.*] Oh, I should fancy Mrs. Cheveley is one of those very modern women of our time who find a new scandal as becoming as a new bonnet, and air them both in the Park every afternoon at five-thirty. I am sure she adores scandals, and that the sorrow of her life at present is that she can't manage to have enough of them.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Writing.*] Why do you say that?

LORD GORING

[*Turning round.*] Well, she wore far too much rouge last night, and not quite enough clothes. That is always a sign of despair in a woman.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Striking a bell.*] But it is worth while my wiring to Vienna, is it not?

LORD GORING

It is always worth while asking a question, though it is not always worth while answering one.

[*Enter Mason.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Is Mr. Trafford in his room?

MASON

Yes, Sir Robert.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Puts what he has written into an envelope, which he then carefully closes.*] Tell him to have this sent off in cipher at once. There must not be a moment's delay.

MASON

Yes, Sir Robert.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Oh, just give that back to me again.

[*Writes something on the envelope. Mason then goes out with the letter.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

She must have had some curious hold over Baron Arnheim. I wonder what it was.

LORD GORING

[*Smiling.*] I wonder.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I will fight her to the death, as long as my wife knows nothing.

LORD GORING

[*Strongly.*] Oh, fight in any case—in any case.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*With a gesture of despair.*] If my wife found out, there would be little left to fight for. Well, as soon as I hear from Vienna, I shall let you know the result. It is a chance, just a chance, but I believe in it. And as I fought the age with its own weapons, I will fight her with her weapons. It is only fair, and she looks like a woman with a past, doesn't she?

LORD GORING

Most pretty women do. But there is a fashion in pasts just as there is a fashion in frocks. Per-

haps Mrs. Cheveley's past is merely a slightly *décolleté one*, and they are excessively popular nowadays. Besides, my dear Robert, I should not build too high hopes on frightening Mrs. Cheveley. I should not fancy Mrs. Cheveley is a woman who would be easily frightened. She has survived all her creditors, and she shows wonderful presence of mind.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Oh! I live on hopes now. I clutch at every chance. I feel like a man on a ship that is sinking. The water is round my feet, and the very air is bitter with storm. Hush! I hear my wife's voice.

[*Enter Lady Chiltern in walking dress.*]

LADY CHILTERN

Good afternoon, Lord Goring!

LORD GORING

Good afternoon, Lady Chiltern! Have you been in the park?

LADY CHILTERN

No: I have just come from the Woman's Liberal Association, where, by the way, Robert,

your name was received with loud applause, and now I have come in to have my tea. [*To Lord Goring.*] You will wait and have some tea, won't you?

LORD GORING

I'll wait for a short time, thanks.

LADY CHILTERN

I will be back in a moment. I am only going to take my hat off.

LORD GORING

[*In his most earnest manner.*] Oh! please don't. It is so pretty. One of the prettiest hats I ever saw. I hope the Woman's Liberal Association received it with loud applause.

LADY CHILTERN

[*With a smile.*] We have much more important work to do than to look at each other's bonnets, Lord Goring.

LORD GORING

Really? What sort of work?

LADY CHILTERN

Oh! dull, useful, delightful things, Factory

Acts, Female Inspectors, the Eight Hours' Bill, the Parliamentary Franchise. . . . Everything, in fact, that you would find thoroughly uninteresting.

LORD GORING

And never bonnets?

LADY CHILTERN

[*With mock indignation.*] Never bonnets, never.

[*Lady Chiltern goes out through the door leading to her boudoir.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Takes Lord Goring's hand.*] You have been a good friend to me, Arthur, a thoroughly good friend.

LORD GORING

I don't know that I have been able to do much for you, Robert, as yet. In fact, I have not been able to do anything for you, as far as I can see. I am thoroughly disappointed with myself.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

You have enabled me to tell you the truth.

That is something. The truth has always stifled me.

LORD GORING

Ah! the truth is a thing I get rid of as soon as possible! Bad habit, by the way. Makes one very unpopular at the club. . . . with the older members. They call it being conceited. Perhaps it is.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I would to God that I had been able to tell the truth . . . to live the truth. Ah! that is the great thing in life, to live the truth. [*Sighs and goes towards the door.*] I'll see you soon again, Arthur, shan't I?

LORD GORING

Certainly. Whenever you like. I'm going to look in at the Bachelors' Ball to-night, unless I find something better to do. But I'll come round to-morrow morning. If you should want me to-night by any chance, send round a note to Curzon Street.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Thank you.

[*As he reaches the door, Lady Chiltern enters from her boudoir.*]

LADY CHILTERN

You are not going, Robert?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I have some letters to write, dear.

LADY CHILTERN

[*Going to him.*] You work too hard, Robert. You seem never to think of yourself, and you are looking so tired.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

It is nothing, dear, nothing.

[*He kisses her and goes out.*]

LADY CHILTERN

[*To Lord Goring.*] Do sit down. I am so glad you have called. I want to talk to you about . . . well, not about bonnets, or the Woman's Liberal Association. You take far too much interest in the first subject, and not nearly enough in the second.

LORD GORING

You want to talk to me about Mrs. Cheveley?

LADY CHILTERN

Yes. You have guessed it. After you left last night I found out that what she had said was really true. Of course I made Robert write her a letter at once, withdrawing his promise.

LORD GORING

So he gave me to understand.

LADY CHILTERN

To have kept it would have been the first stain on a career that has been stainless always. Robert must be above reproach. He is not like other men. He cannot afford to do what other men do. [*She looks at Lord Goring, who remains silent.*] Don't you agree with me? You are Robert's greatest friend. You are our greatest friend, Lord Goring. No one, except myself, knows Robert better than you do. He has no secrets from me, and I don't think he has any from you.

LORD GORING

He certainly has no secrets from me. At least I don't think so.

LADY CHILTERN

Then am I not right in my estimate of him? I know I am right. But speak to me frankly.

LORD GORING

[*Looking straight at her.*] Quite frankly?

LADY CHILTERN

Surely. You have nothing to conceal, have you?

LORD GORING

Nothing. But, my dear Lady Chiltern, I think, if you will allow me to say so, that in practical life——

LADY CHILTERN

[*Smiling.*] Of which you know so little, Lord Goring——

LORD GORING

Of which I know nothing by experience, though I know something by observation. I think that in practical life there is something about success, actual success, that is a little unscrupulous, something about ambition that is unscrupulous always. Once a man has set his heart and soul on getting to a certain point, if

he has to climb the crag, he climbs the crag; if he has to walk in the mire——

LADY CHILTERN

Well?

LORD GORING

He walks in the mire. Of course I am only talking generally about life.

LADY CHILTERN

[*Gravely.*] I hope so. Why do you look at me so strangely, Lord Goring?

LORD GORING

Lady Chiltern, I have sometimes thought that . . . perhaps you are a little hard in your views on life. I think that . . . often you don't make sufficient allowances. In every nature there are elements of weakness, or worse than weakness. Supposing, for instance, that—that any public man, my father, or Lord Merton, or Robert, say, had, years ago, written some foolish letter to some one . . .

LADY CHILTERN

What do you mean by a foolish letter?

LORD GORING

A letter gravely compromising one's position. I am only putting an imaginary case.

LADY CHILTERN

Robert is as incapable of doing a foolish thing as he is of doing a wrong thing.

LORD GORING

[*After a long pause.*] Nobody is incapable of doing a foolish thing. Nobody is incapable of doing a wrong thing.

LADY CHILTERN

Are you a Pessimist? What will the other dandies say? They will all have to go into mourning.

LORD GORING

[*Rising.*] No, Lady Chiltern, I am not a Pessimist. Indeed I am not sure that I quite know what Pessimism really means. All I do know is that life cannot be understood without much charity, cannot be lived without much charity. It is love, and not German philosophy, that is the true explanation of this world, whatever may be the explanation of the next. And if you

are ever in trouble, Lady Chiltern, trust me absolutely, and I will help you in every way I can. If you ever want me, come to me for my assistance, and you shall have it. Come at once to me.

LADY CHILTERN

[*Looking at him in surprise.*] Lord Goring, you are talking quite seriously. I don't think I ever heard you talk seriously before.

LORD GORING

[*Laughing.*] You must excuse me, Lady Chiltern. It won't occur again, if I can help it.

LADY CHILTERN

But I like you to be serious.

[*Enter Mabel Chiltern, in the most ravishing frock.*]

MABEL CHILTERN

Dear Gertrude, don't say such a dreadful thing to Lord Goring. Seriousness would be very unbecoming to him. Good afternoon, Lord Goring! Pray be as trivial as you can.

LORD GORING

I should like to, Miss Mabel, but I am afraid I am . . . a little out of practice this morning; and besides, I have to be going now.

MABEL CHILTERN

Just when I have come in! What dreadful manners you have! I am sure you were very badly brought up.

LORD GORING

I was.

MABEL CHILTERN

I wish I had brought you up!

LORD GORING

I am so sorry you didn't.

MABEL CHILTERN

It is too late now, I suppose?

LORD GORING

[*Smiling.*] I am not so sure.

MABEL CHILTERN

Will you ride to-morrow morning?

LORD GORING

Yes, at ten.

MABEL CHILTERN

Don't forget.

LORD GORING

Of course I shan't. By the way, Lady Chiltern, there is no list of your guests in "The Morning Post" of to-day. It has apparently been crowded out by the County Council, or the Lambeth Conference, or something equally boring. Could you let me have a list? I have a particular reason for asking you.

LADY CHILTERN

I am sure Mr. Trafford will be able to give you one.

LORD GORING

Thanks, so much.

MABEL CHILTERN

Tommy is the most useful person in London.

LORD GORING

[*Turning to her.*] And who is the most ornamental?

MABEL CHILTERN

[*Triumphantly.*] I am.

LORD GORING

How clever of you to guess it! [*Takes up his hat and cane.*] Good-bye, Lady Chiltern! You will remember what I said to you, won't you?

LADY CHILTERN

Yes; but I don't know why you said it to me.

LORD GORING

I hardly know myself. Good-bye, Miss Mabel!

MABEL CHILTERN

[*With a little move of disappointment.*] I wish you were not going. I have had four wonderful adventures this morning; four and a half, in fact. You might stop and listen to some of them.

LORD GORING

How very selfish of you to have four and a half! There won't be any left for me.

MABEL CHILTERN

I don't want you to have any. They would not be good for you.

LORD GORING

That is the first unkind thing you have ever said to me. How charmingly you said it! Ten to-morrow.

MABEL CHILTERN

Sharp.

LORD GORING

Quite sharp. But don't bring Mr. Trafford.

MABEL CHILTERN

[*With a little toss of the head.*] Of course I shan't bring Tommy Trafford. Tommy Trafford is in great disgrace.

LORD GORING

I am delighted to hear it. [*Bows and goes out.*]

MABEL CHILTERN

Gertrude, I wish you would speak to Tommy Trafford.

LADY CHILTERN

What has poor Mr. Trafford done this time? Robert says he is the best secretary he has ever had.

MABEL CHILTERN

Well, Tommy has proposed to me again. Tommy really does nothing but propose to me. He proposed to me last night in the music-room, when I was quite unprotected, as there was an elaborate trio going on. I didn't dare to make the smallest repartee, I need hardly tell you. If I had, it would have stopped the music at once. Musical people are so absurdly unreasonable. They always want one to be perfectly dumb at the very moment when one is longing to be absolutely deaf. Then he proposed to me in broad daylight this morning, in front of that dreadful statue of Achilles. Really, the things that go on in front of that work of art are quite appalling. The police should interfere. At luncheon I saw by the glare in his eye that he was going to propose again, and I just managed to check him in time by assuring him that I was a bimetallist. Fortunately I don't know what bimetallism means. And I don't believe anybody else does either. But the observation crushed Tommy for ten minutes. He looked quite shocked. And then Tommy is so annoying in the way he proposes. If he proposed at the top of his voice, I should

not mind so much. That might produce some effect on the public. But he does it in a horrid confidential way. When Tommy wants to be romantic he talks to one just like a doctor. I am very fond of Tommy, but his methods of proposing are quite out of date. I wish, Gertrude, you would speak to him, and tell him that once a week is quite often enough to propose to anyone, and that it should always be done in a manner that attracts some attention.

LADY CHILTERN

Dear Mabel, don't talk like that. Besides, Robert thinks very highly of Mr. Trafford. He believes he has a brillant future before him.

MABEL CHILTERN

Oh! I wouldn't marry a man with a future before him for anything under the sun.

LADY CHILTERN

Mabel!

MABEL CHILTERN

I know, dear. You married a man with a future, didn't you? But then Robert was a genius, and you have a noble, self-sacrificing

character. You can stand geniuses. I have no character at all, and Robert is the only genius I could ever bear. As a rule, I think they are quite impossible. Geniuses talk so much, don't they? Such a bad habit! And they are always thinking about themselves, when I want them to be thinking about me. I must go round now and rehearse at Lady Basildon's. You remember, we are having tableaux, don't you? The Triumph of something, I don't know what! I hope it will be triumph of me. Only triumph I am really interested in at present. [*Kisses Lady Chiltern and goes out; then comes running back.*] Oh, Gertrude, do you know who is coming to see you? That dreadful Mrs. Cheveley, in a most lovely gown. Did you ask her?

LADY CHILTERN

[*Rising.*] Mrs. Cheveley! Coming to see me? Impossible!

MABEL CHILTERN

I assure you she is coming upstairs, as large as life and not nearly so natural.

LADY CHILTERN

You need not wait, Mabel. Remember, Lady Basildon is expecting you.

MABEL CHILTERN

Oh! I must shake hands with Lady Markby. She is delightful. I love being scolded by her.

[*Enter Mason.*]

MASON

Lady Markby. Mrs. Cheveley.

[*Enter Lady Markby and Mrs. Cheveley.*]

LADY CHILTERN

[*Advancing to meet them.*] Dear Lady Markby, how nice of you to come and see me! [*Shakes hands with her, and bows somewhat distantly to Mrs. Cheveley.*] Won't you sit down, Mrs. Cheveley?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Thanks. Isn't that Miss Chiltern? I should like so much to know her.

LADY CHILTERN

Mabel, Mrs. Cheveley wishes to know you. [*Mabel Chiltern gives a little nod.*]

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Sitting down.*] I thought your frock so charming last night, Miss Chiltern. So simple and . . . suitable.

MABEL CHILTERN

Really? I must tell my dressmaker. It will be such a surprise to her. Good-bye, Lady Markby!

LADY MARKBY

Going already?

MABEL CHILTERN

I am so sorry but I am obliged to. I am just off to rehearsal. I have got to stand on my head in some tableaux.

LADY MARKBY

On your head, child? Oh, I hope not. I believe it is most unhealthy. [*Takes a seat on the sofa next Lady Chiltern.*]

MABEL CHILTERN

But it is for an excellent charity; in aid of the Undeserving, the only people I am really interested in. I am the secretary, and Tommy Trafford is treasurer.

MRS. CHEVELEY

And what is Lord Goring?

MABEL CHILTERN

Oh! Lord Goring is president.

MRS. CHEVELEY

The post should suit him admirably, unless he has deteriorated since I knew him first.

LADY MARKBY

[*Reflecting.*] You are remarkably modern, Mabel. A little too modern, perhaps. Nothing is so dangerous as being too modern. One is apt to grow old-fashioned quite suddenly. I have known many instances of it.

MABEL CHILTERN

What a dreadful prospect!

LADY MARKBY

Ah, my dear, you need not be nervous. You will always be as pretty as possible. That is the best fashion there is, and the only fashion that England succeeds in setting.

MABEL CHILTERN

[*With a curtsey.*] Thank you so much, Lady Markby, for England . . . and myself. [*Goes out.*]

LADY MARKBY

[*Turning to Lady Chiltern.*] Dear Gertrude, we just called to know if Mrs. Cheveley's diamond brooch has been found.

LADY CHILTERN

Here?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Yes. I missed it when I got back to Claridge's, and I thought I might possibly have dropped it here.

LADY CHILTERN

I have heard nothing about it. But I will send for the butler and ask. [*Touches the bell.*]

MRS. CHEVELEY

Oh, pray don't trouble, Lady Chiltern. I daresay I lost it at the Opera before we came on here.

LADY MARKBY

Ah yes, I suppose it must have been at the Opera. The fact is, we all scramble and jostle so much nowadays that I wonder we have anything at all left on us at the end of an evening. I know myself that, when I am coming back from the Drawing Room, I always feel as if I hadn't a shred on me, except a small shred of decent reputation, just enough to prevent the

lower classes making painful observations though the windows of the carriage. The fact is that our Society is terribly overpopulated. Really, some one should arrange a proper scheme of assisted emigration. It would do a great deal of good.

MRS. CHEVELEY

I quite agree with you, Lady Markby. It is nearly six years since I have been in London for the season, and I must say Society has become dreadfully mixed. One sees the oddest people everywhere.

LADY MARKBY

That is quite true, dear. But one needn't know them. I'm sure I don't know half the people who come to my house. Indeed, from all I hear, I shouldn't like to.

[*Enter Mason.*]

LADY CHILTERN

What sort of a brooch was it that you lost, Mrs. Cheveley?

MRS. CHEVELEY

A diamond snake-brooch, with a ruby, a rather large ruby?

LADY MARKBY

I thought you said there was a sapphire on the head, dear?

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Smiling.*] No, Lady Markby—a ruby.

LADY MARKBY

[*Nodding her head.*] And very becoming, I am quite sure.

LADY CHILTERN

Has a ruby and diamond brooch been found in any of the rooms this morning, Mason?

MASON

No, my lady.

MRS. CHEVELEY

It really is of no consequence, Lady Chiltern. I am so sorry to have put you to any inconvenience.

LADY CHILTERN

[*Coldly.*] Oh, it has been no inconvenience. That will do, Mason. You can bring tea.

[*Exit Mason.*]

LADY MARKBY

Well, I must say it is most annoying to lose anything. I remember once at Bath, years ago, losing in the Pump Room an exceedingly handsome cameo bracelet that Sir John had given me. I don't think he has ever given me anything since, I am sorry to say. He has sadly degenerated. Really, this horrid House of Commons quite ruins our husbands for us. I think the Lower House by far the greatest blow to a happy married life that there has been since that terrible thing called the Higher Education of Women was invented.

LADY CHILTERN

Ah, it is heresy to say that in this house, Lady Markby. Robert is a great champion of the Higher Education of Women, and so, I am afraid, am I.

MRS. CHEVELEY

The higher education of men is what I should like to see. Men need it so sadly.

LADY MARKBY

They do, dear. But I am afraid such a scheme would be quite unpractical. I don't

think man has much capacity for development. He has got as far as he can, and that is not far, is it? With regard to women, well, dear Gertrude, you belong to the younger generation, and I am sure it is all right if you approve of it. In my time, of course, we were taught not to understand anything. That was the old system, and wonderfully interesting it was. I assure you that the amount of things I and my poor dear sister were taught not to understand was quite extraordinary. But modern women understand everything, I am told.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Except their husbands. That is the one thing the modern woman never understands.

LADY MARKBY

And a very good thing, too, dear, I daresay. It might break up many a happy home if they did. Not yours, I need hardly say, Gertrude. You have married a pattern husband. I wish I could say as much for myself. But since Sir John has taken to attending the debates regularly, which he never used to do in the good old days, his language has become quite impossible. He always seems to think that he is addressing

the House and consequently whenever he discusses the state of the agricultural labourer, or the Welsh Church, or something quite improper of that kind, I am obliged to send all the servants out of the room. It is not pleasant to see one's own butler, who has been with one for twenty-three years, actually blushing at the sideboard, and the footmen making contortions in corners like persons in circuses. I assure you my life will be quite ruined unless they send John at once to the Upper House. He won't take any interest in politics then, will he? The House of Lords is so sensible. An assembly of gentlemen. But in his present state, Sir John is really a great trial. Why, this morning before breakfast was half over, he stood up on the hearthrug, put his hands in his pockets, and appealed to the country at the top of his voice. I left the table as soon as I had my second cup of tea, I need hardly say. But his violent language could be heard all over the house! I trust, Gertrude, that Sir Robert is not like that?

LADY CHILTERN

But I am very much interested in politics, Lady Markby. I love to hear Robert talk about them.

LADY MARKBY

Well, I hope he is not as devoted to Blue Books as Sir John is. I don't think they can be quite improving reading for anyone.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Languidly.*] I have never read a Blue Book. I prefer books . . . in yellow covers.

LADY MARKBY

[*Genially unconscious.*] Yellow is a gayer colour, is it not? I used to wear yellow a good deal in my early days, and would do so now if Sir John was not so painfully personal in his observations, and a man on the question of dress is always ridiculous, is he not?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Oh, no! I think men are the only authorities on dress.

LADY MARKBY

Really? One wouldn't say so from the sort of hats they wear, would one?

[*The butler enters, followed by the footman. Tea is set on a small table close to Lady Chiltern.*]

LADY CHILTERN

May I give you some tea, Mrs. Cheveley?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Thanks. [*The butler hands Mrs. Cheveley a cup of tea on a salver.*]

LADY CHILTERN

Some tea, Lady Markby?

LADY MARKBY

No thanks dear. [*The servants go out.*] The fact is, I have promised to go round for ten minutes to see poor Lady Brancaster, who is in very great trouble. Her daughter, quite a well-brought-up girl, too, has actually become engaged to be married to a curate in Shropshire. It is very sad, very sad indeed. I can't understand this modern mania for curates. In my time we girls saw them, of course, running about the place like rabbits. But we never took any notice of them, I need hardly say. But I am told that nowadays country society is quite honeycombed with them. I think it most irreligious. And then the eldest son has quarrelled with his father, and it is said that when they meet at the club Lord Brancaster always hides

himself behind the money article in "The Times." However, I believe that is quite a common occurrence nowadays and that they have to take in extra copies of "The Times" at all the clubs in St. James's Street; there are so many sons who won't have anything to do with their fathers, and so many fathers who won't speak to their sons. I think myself, it is very much to be regretted.

MRS. CHEVELEY

So do I. Fathers have so much to learn from their sons nowadays.

LADY MARKBY

Really, dear? What?

MRS. CHEVELEY

The art of living. The only really Fine Art we have produced in modern times.

LADY MARKBY

[*Shaking her head.*] Ah! I am afraid Lord Brancaster knew a good deal about that. More than his poor wife ever did. [*Turning to Lady Chiltern.*] You know Lady Brancaster, don't you, dear?

LADY CHILTERN

Just slightly. She was staying at Langston last autumn, when we were there.

LADY MARKBY

Well, like all stout women, she looks the very picture of happiness, as no doubt you noticed. But there are many tragedies in her family, besides this affair of the curate. Her own sister, Mrs. Jekyll, had a most unhappy life; through no fault of her own, I am sorry to say. She ultimately was so broken-hearted that she went into a convent, or on to the operatic stage, I forget which. No; I think it was decorative art-needlework she took up. I know she had lost all sense of pleasure in life. [*Rising.*] And now, Gertrude, if you will allow me, I shall leave Mrs. Cheveley in your charge and call back for her in a quarter of an hour. Or perhaps, dear Mrs. Cheveley, you wouldn't mind waiting in the carriage while I am with Lady Brancaster. As I intend it to be a visit of condolence, I shan't stay long.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Rising.*] I don't mind waiting in the car-

riage at all, provided there is somebody to look at one.

LADY MARKBY

Well, I hear the curate is always prowling about the house.

MRS. CHEVELEY

I am afraid I am not fond of girl friends.

LADY CHILTERN

[*Rising.*] Oh, I hope Mrs. Cheveley will stay here a little. I should like to have a few minutes' conversation with her.

MRS. CHEVELEY

How very kind of you, Lady Chiltern! Believe me, nothing would give me greater pleasure.

LADY MARKBY

Ah! no doubt you both have many pleasant reminiscenees of your schooldays to talk over together. Good-bye, dear Gertrude! Shall I see you at Lady Bonar's to-night? She has discovered a wonderful new genius. He does . . . nothing at all, I believe. That is a great comfort, is it not?

LADY CHILTERN

Robert and I are dining at home by ourselves to-night, and I don't think I shall go anywhere afterwards. Robert, of course, will have to be in the House. But there is nothing interesting on.

LADY MARKBY

Dining at home by yourselves? Is that quite prudent? Ah, I forgot, your husband is an exception. Mine is the general rule, and nothing ages a woman so rapidly as having married the general rule. [*Exit Lady Markby.*]

MRS. CHEVELEY

Wonderful woman, Lady Markby, isn't she? Talks more and says less than anybody I ever met. She is made to be a public speaker. Much more so than her husband, though he is a typical Englishman, always dull and usually violent.

LADY CHILTERN

[*Makes no answer, but remains standing. There is a pause. Then the eyes of the two women meet. Lady Chiltern looks stern and pale. Mrs. Cheveley seems rather amused.*] Mrs. Cheveley, I think it is right to tell you quite

frankly that, had I known who you really were, I should not have invited you to my house last night.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*With an impertinent smile.*] Really?

LADY CHILTERN

I could not have done so.

MRS. CHEVELEY

I see that after all these years you have not changed a bit, Gertrude.

LADY CHILTERN

I never change.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Elevating her eyebrows.*] Then life has taught you nothing?

LADY CHILTERN

It has taught me that a person who has once been guilty of a dishonest and dishonourable action may be guilty of it a second time, and should be shunned.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Would you apply that rule to everyone?

LADY CHILTERN

Yes, to everyone, without exception.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Then I am sorry for you, Gertrude, very sorry for you.

LADY CHILTERN

You see now, I am sure, that for many reasons any further acquaintance between us during your stay in London is quite impossible?

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Leaning back in her chair.*] Do you know, Gertrude, I don't mind your talking morality a bit. Morality is simply the attitude we adopt towards people whom we personally dislike. You dislike me. I am quite aware of that. And I have always detested you. And yet I have come here to do you a service.

LADY CHILTERN

[*Contemptuously.*] Like the service you wished to render my husband last night, I suppose. Thank heaven, I saved him from that.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Starting to her feet.*] It was you who made

him write that insolent letter to me? It was you who made him break his promise?

LADY CHILTERN

Yes.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Then you must make him keep it. I give you till to-morrow morning—no more. If by that time your husband does not solemnly bind himself to help me in this great scheme in which I am interested——

LADY CHILTERN

This fraudulent speculation——

MRS. CHEVELEY

Call it what you choose. I hold your husband in the hollow of my hand, and if you are wise you will make him do what I tell him.

LADY CHILTERN

[*Rising and going towards her.*] You are impertinent. What has my husband to do with you? With a woman like you?

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*With a bitter laugh.*] In this world like

meets with like. It is because your husband is himself fraudulent and dishonest that we pair so well together. Between you and him there are chasms. He and I are closer than friends. We are enemies linked together. The same sin binds us.

LADY CHILTERN

How dare you class my husband with yourself? How dare you threaten him or me? Leave my house. You are unfit to enter it.

[*Sir Robert Chiltern enters from behind. He hears his wife's last words, and sees to whom they are addressed. He grows deadly pale.*]

MRS. CHEVELEY

Your house! A house bought with the price of dishonour. A house, everything in which has been paid for by fraud. [*Turns round and sees Sir Robert Chiltern.*] Ask him what the origin of his fortune is! Get him to tell you how he sold to a stockbroker a Cabinet secret. Learn from him to what you owe your position.

LADY CHILTERN

It is not true! Robert! It is not true!

"'Look at him? Can he deny it? Does he dare to?'"
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MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Pointing at him with outstretched finger.*] Look at him! Can he deny it? Does he dare to?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Go! Go at once. You have done your worst now.

MRS. CHEVELEY

My worst? I have not yet finished with you, with either of you. I give you both till to-morrow at noon. If by then you don't do what I bid you to do, the whole world shall know the origin of Robert Chiltern.

[*Sir Robert Chiltern strikes the bell. Enter Mason.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Show Mrs. Cheveley out.

[*Mrs. Cheveley starts; then bows with somewhat exaggerated politeness to Lady Chiltern, who makes no sign of response. As she passes by Sir Robert Chiltern, who is standing close to the door, she pauses for a moment and looks him straight in the face. She then goes out, followed by the servant, who closes the door after*

him. The husband and wife are left alone. Lady Chiltern stands like some one in a dreadful dream. Then she turns round anl looks at her husband. She looks at him with strange eyes, as though she was seeing him for the first time.]

LADY CHILTERN

You sold a Cabinet secret for money! You began your life with fraud! You built up your career on dishonour! Oh, tell me it is not true! Lie to me! Lie to me! Tell me it is not true!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

What this woman said is quite true. But, Gertrude, listen to me. You don't realize how I was tempted. Let me tell you the whole thing. [*Goes towards her.*]

LADY CHILTERN

Don't come near me. Don't touch me. I feel as if you had soiled me forever. Oh! what a mask you have been wearing all these years! A horrible painted mask! You sold yourself for money. Oh! a common thief were better! You put yourself up to sale to the highest bidder! You were bought in the market. You

lied to the whole world. And yet you will not lie to me.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Rushing towards her.*] Gertrude! Gertrude!

LADY CHILTERN

[*Thrusting him back with outstretched hands.*] No, don't speak! Say nothing! Your voice wakes terrible memories—memories of things that made me love you—memories of words that made me love you—memories that now are horrible to me. And how I worshipped you! You were to me something apart from common life, a thing pure, noble, honest, without stain. The world seemed to me finer because you were in it, and goodness more real because you lived. And now—oh, when I think that I made of a man like you my ideal! the ideal of my life!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

There was your mistake. There was your error. The error all women commit. Why can't you women love us, faults and all? Why do you place us on monstrous pedestals? We have all feet of clay, women as well as men;

but when we men love women, we love them knowing their weaknesses, their follies, their imperfections, love them all the more, it may be, for that reason. It is not the perfect, but the imperfect, who have need of love. It is when we are wounded by our own hands, or by the hands of others, that love should come to cure us—else what use is love at all? All sins, except a sin against itself, Love should forgive. All lives, save loveless lives, true Love should pardon. A man's love is like that. It is wider, larger, more human than a woman's. Women think that they are making ideals of men. What they are making of us are false idols merely. You made your false idol of me, and I had not the courage to come down, show you my wounds, tell you my weaknesses. I was afraid that I might lose your love, as I have lost it now. And so, last night you ruined my life for me—yes, ruined it! What this woman asked of me was nothing compared to what she offered to me. She offered security, peace, stability. The sin of my youth, that I had thought was buried, rose up in front of me, hideous, horrible, with its hands at my throat. I could have killed it for ever, sent it back into its tomb,

destroyed its record, burned the one witness against me. You prevented me. No one but you, you know it. And now what is there before me but public disgrace, ruin, terrible shame, the mockery of the world, a lonely dishonoured life, a lonely dishonoured death, it may be, some day? Let women make no more ideals of men! let them not put them on altars and bow before them, or they may ruin other lives as completely as you—you whom I have so wildly loved—have ruined mine!

[*He passes from the room. Lady Chiltern rushes towards him, but the door is closed when she reaches it. Pale with anguish, bewildered, helpless, she sways like a plant in the water. Her hands, outstretched, seem to tremble in the air like blossoms in the wind. Then she flings herself down beside a sofa and buries her face. Her sobs are like the sobs of a child.*]

ACT-DROP.

THIRD ACT.

SCENE—*The Library in Lord Goring's house. An Adams room. On the right is the door leading into the hall. On the left, the door of the smoking-room. A pair of folding doors at the back open into the drawing-room. The fire is lit. Phipps, the butler, is arranging some newspapers on the writing-table. The distinction of Phipps is his impassivity. He has been termed by enthusiasts the Ideal Butler. The Sphinx is not so incommunicable. He is a mask with a manner. Of his intellectual or emotional life history knows nothing. He represents the dominance of form.*

[*Enter Lord Goring in evening dress with a buttonhole. He is wearing a silk hat and Inverness cape. White-gloved, he carries a Louis Seize cane. His are all the delicate fopperies of*

Fashion. One sees that he stands in immediate relation to modern life, makes it indeed, and so masters it. He is the first well-dressed philosopher in the history of thought.]

LORD GORING

Got my second buttonhole for me, Phipps?

PHIPPS

Yes, my lord. [*Takes his hat, cane and cape, and presents new buttonhole on salver.*]

LORD GORING

Rather distinguished thing, Phipps. I am the only person of the smallest importance in London at present who wears a buttonhole.

PHIPPS

Yes, my Lord, I have observed that.

LORD GORING

[*Taking out old buttonhole.*] You see, Phipps, Fashion is what one wears oneself. What is unfashionable is what other people wear.

PHIPPS

Yes, my lord.

LORD GORING

Just as vulgarity is simply the conduct of other people.

PHIPPS

Yes, my lord.

LORD GORING

[*Putting in new buttonhole.*] And falsehoods the truths of other people.

PHIPPS

Yes, my lord.

LORD GORING

Other people are quite dreadful. The only possible society is oneself.

PHIPPS

Yes, my lord.

LORD GORING

To love oneself is the beginning of a life-long romance, Phipps.

PHIPPS

Yes, my lord.

LORD GORING

[*Looking at himself in the glass.*] Don't think I quite like this buttonhole, Phipps. Makes me look a little too old. Makes me almost in the prime of life, eh, Phipps?

PHIPPS

I don't observe any alteration in your lordship's appearance.

LORD GORING

You don't, Phipps?

PHIPPS

No, my lord.

LORD GORING

I am not quite sure. For the future a more trivial buttonhole, Phipps, on Thursday evenings.

PHIPPS

I will speak to the florist, my lord. She has had a loss in her family lately, which perhaps accounts for the lack of triviality your lordship complains of in the buttonhole.

LORD GORING

Extraordinary thing about the lower classes in England—they are always losing their relations.

PHIPPS

Yes, my lord! They are extremely fortunate in that respect.

LORD GORING

[*Turns round and looks at him. Phipps remains impassive.*] Hum! Any letters, Phipps?

PHIPPS

Three, my lord. [*Hands letters on a salver.*]

LORD GORING

[*Takes letters.*] Want my cab round in twenty minutes.

PHIPPS

Yes, my lord. [*Goes towards door.*]

LORD GORING

[*Holds up letter in pink envelope.*] Ahem! Phipps, when did this letter arrive?

PHIPPS

It was brought by hand just after your lordship went to the Club.

LORD GORING

That will do. [*Exit Phipps.*] Lady Chiltern's handwriting on Lady Chiltern's pink notepaper. That is rather curious. I thought Robert was to write. Wonder what Lady Chiltern has got to say to me? [*Sits at bureau and opens letter, and reads it.*] "I want you. I trust you. I am coming to you. Gertrude." [*Puts down the letter with a puzzled look. Then takes it up, and reads it again slowly.*] "I want you. I trust you. I am coming to you." So she has found out everything! Poor woman! Poor woman! [*Pulls out watch and looks at it.*] But what an hour to call! Ten o'clock! I shall have to give up going to the Berkshires. However, it is always nice to be expected, and not to arrive. I am not expected at the Bachelors', so I shall certainly go there. Well, I will make her stand by her husband. That is the only thing for her to do. That is the only thing for any woman to do. It is the growth of the moral sense in women that makes marriage such a hopeless, one-sided institution. Ten o'clock. She should be here soon. I must tell Phipps I am not in to anyone else. [*Goes towards bell.*]

[*Enter Phipps.*]

PHIPPS

Lord Caversham.

LORD GORING

Oh, why will parents always appear at the wrong time? Some extraordinary mistake in nature, I suppose. [*Enter Lord Caversham.*] Delighted to see you, my dear father. [*Goes to meet him.*]

LORD CAVERSHAM

Take my cloak off.

LORD GORING

Is it worth while, father?

LORD CAVERSHAM

Of course it is worth while, sir. Which is the most comfortable chair?

LORD GORING

This one, father. It is the chair I use myself, when I have visitors.

LORD CAVERSHAM

Thank ye. No draught, I hope, in this room?

LORD GORING

No, father.

LORD CAVERSHAM

[*Sitting down.*] Glad to hear it. Can't stand draughts. No draughts at home.

LORD GORING

Good many breezes, father.

LORD CAVERSHAM

Eh? Eh? Don't understand what you mean. Want to have a serious conversation with you, sir.

LORD GORING

My dear father! At this hour?

LORD CAVERSHAM

Well, sir, it is only ten o'clock. What is your objection to the hour? I think the hour is an admirable hour!

LORD GORING

Well, the fact is, father, this is not my day for talking seriously. I am very sorry, but it is not my day.

LORD CAVERSHAM

What do you mean, sir?

LORD GORING

During the season, father, I only talk seriously on the first Tuesday in every month, from four to seven.

LORD CAVERSHAM

Well, make it Tuesday, sir, make it Tuesday.

LORD GORING

But it is after seven, father, and my doctor says I must not have any serious conversation after seven. It makes me talk in my sleep.

LORD CAVERSHAM

Talk in your sleep, sir? What does that matter? You are not married.

LORD GORING

No, father, I am not married.

LORD CAVERSHAM

Hum! That is what I have come to talk to you about, sir. You have got to get married, and at once. Why, when I was your age, sir, I had been an inconsolable widower for three

months, and was already paying my addresses to your admirable mother. Damme, sir, it is your duty to get married. You can't be always living for pleasure. Every man of position is married nowadays. Bachelors are not fashionable any more. They are a damaged lot. Too much is known about them. You must get a wife, sir. Look where your friend Robert Chiltern has got to by probity, hard work, and a sensible marriage with a good woman. Why don't you imitate him, sir? Why don't you take him for your model?

LORD GORING

I think I shall, father.

LORD CAVERSHAM

I wish you would, sir. Then I should be happy. At present I make your mother's life miserable on your account. You are heartless, sir, quite heartless.

LORD GORING

I hope not, father.

LORD CAVERSHAM

And it is high time for you to get married. You are thirty-four years of age, sir.

LORD GORING

Yes, father, but I only admit to thirty-two—thirty-one and a half when I have a really good buttonhole. This buttonhole is not . . . trivial enough.

LORD CAVERSHAM

I tell you you are thirty-four, sir. And there is a draught in your room, besides, which makes your conduct worse. Why did you tell me there was no draught, sir? I feel a draught, sir, I feel it distinctly.

LORD GORING

So do I, father. It is a dreadful draught. I will come and see you to-morrow, father. We can talk over anything you like. Let me help you on with your cloak, father.

LORD CAVERSHAM

No, sir; I have called this evening for a definite purpose, and I am going to see it through at all costs to my health or yours. Put down my cloak, sir.

LORD GORING

Certainly, father. But let us go into an-

other room. [*Rings bell.*] There is a dreadful draught here. [*Enter Phipps.*] Phipps, is there a good fire in the smoking-room?

PHIPPS

Yes, my lord.

LORD GORING

Come in there, father. Your sneezes are quite heart-rending.

LORD CAVERSHAM

Well, sir, I suppose I have a right to sneeze when I choose?

LORD GORING

[*Apologetically.*] Quite so, father. I was merely expressing sympathy.

LORD CAVERSHAM

Oh, damn sympathy. There is a great deal too much of that sort of thing going on nowadays.

LORD GORING

I quite agree with you, father. If there was less sympathy in the world there would be less trouble in the world.

LORD CAVERSHAM

[*Going towards the smoking-room.*] That is a paradox, sir. I hate paradoxes.

LORD GORING

So do I, father. Everybody one meets is a paradox nowadays. It is a great bore. It makes society so obvious.

LORD CAVERSHAM

[*Turning round and looking at his son beneath his bushy eyebrows.*] Do you always really understand what you say, sir?

LORD GORING

[*After some hesitation.*] Yes, father, if I listen attentively.

LORD CAVERSHAM

[*Indignantly.*] If you listen attentively! . . . Conceited young puppy!

[*Goes off grumbling into the smoking-room. Phipps enters.*]

LORD GORING

Phipps, there is a lady coming to see me this evening on particular business. Show her into

the drawing-room when she arrives. You understand?

PHIPPS

Yes, my lord.

LORD GORING

It is a matter of the gravest importance, Phipps.

PHIPPS

I understand, my lord.

LORD GORING

No one else is to be admitted, under any circumstances.

PHIPPS

I understand, my lord. [*Bell rings.*]

LORD GORING

Ah, that is probably the lady. I shall see her myself.

[*Just as he is going towards the door Lord Caversham enters from the smoking-room.*]

LORD CAVERSHAM

Well, sir? am I to wait attendance on you?

LORD GORING

[*Considerably perplexed.*] In a moment, father. Do excuse me. [*Lord Caversham goes back.*] Well, remember my instructions, Phipps —into that room.

PHIPPS

Yes, my lord.

[*Lord Goring goes into the smoking-room. Harold, the footman, shows Mrs. Cheveley in. Lamia-like, she is in green and silver. She has a cloak of black satin, lined with dead rose-leaf silk.*]

HAROLD

What name, madam?

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*To Phipps, who advances towards her.*] Is Lord Goring not here? I was told he was at home.

PHIPPS

His lordship is engaged at present with Lord Caversham, madam.

[*Turns a cold, glassy eye on Harold, who at once retires.*]

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*To herself.*] How very filial!

PHIPPS

His lordship told me to ask you, madam, to be kind enough to wait in the drawing-room for him. His lordship will come to you there.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*With a look of surprise.*] Lord Goring expects me?

PHIPPS

Yes, madam.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Are you quite sure?

PHIPPS

His lordship told me that if a lady called I was to ask her to wait in the drawing-room. [*Goes to the door of the drawing-room and opens it.*] His lordship's directions on the subject were very precise.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*To herself.*] How thoughtful of him! To expect the unexpected shows a thoroughly mod-

ern intellect. [*Goes towards the drawing-room and looks in.*] Ugh! How dreary a bachelor's drawing-room always looks. I shall have to alter all this. [*Phipps brings the lamp from the writing-table.*] No, I don't care for that lamp. It is far too glaring. Light some candles.

PHIPPS

[*Replaces lamp.*] Certainly, madam.

MRS. CHEVELEY

I hope the candles have very becoming shades.

PHIPPS

We have had no complaints about them, madam, as yet.

[*Passes into the drawing-room and begins to light the candles.*]

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*To herself.*] I wonder what woman he is waiting for to-night. It will be delightful to catch him. Men always look so silly when they are caught. And they are always being caught. [*Looks about room and approaches the writing-table.*] What a very interesting room! What a very interesting picture! Wonder what his

correspondence is like. [*Takes up letters.*] Oh, what a very uninteresting correspondence! Bills and cards, debts and dowagers! Who on earth writes to him on pink paper! How silly to write on pink paper! It looks like the beginning of a middle-class romance. Romance should never begin with sentiment. It should begin with science and end with a settlement. [*Puts letter down, then takes it up again.*] I know that handwriting. That is Gertrude Chiltern's. I remember it perfectly. The ten commandments in every stroke of the pen, and the moral law all over the page. Wonder what Gertrude is writing to him about? Something horrid about me, I suppose. How I detest that woman! [*Reads it.*] "I trust you. I want you. I am coming to you. Gertrude." "I trust you. I want you. I am coming to you."

[*A look of triumph comes over her face. She is just about to steal the letter, when Phipps comes in.*]

PHIPPS

The candles in the drawing-room are lit, madam, as you directed.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Thank you. [*Rises hastily, and slips the letter under a large silver-cased blotting-book that is lying on the table.*]

PHIPPS

I trust the shades will be to your liking, madam. They are the most becoming we have. They are the same as his lordship uses himself when he is dressing for dinner.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*With a smile.*] Then I am sure they will be perfectly right.

PHIPPS

[*Gravely.*] Thank you, madam.

[*Mrs. Cheveley goes into the drawing-room. Phipps closes the door and retires. The door is then slowly opened, and Mrs. Cheveley comes out and creeps stealthily towards the writing-table. Suddenly voices are heard from the smoking-room. Mrs. Cheveley grows pale and stops. The voices grow louder, and she goes back into the drawing-room, biting her lip.*]

[*Enter Lord Goring and Lord Caversham.*]

LORD GORING

[*Expostulating.*] My dear father, if I am to get married, surely you will allow me to choose the time, place and person? Particularly the person.

LORD CAVERSHAM

[*Testily.*] That is a matter for me, sir. You would probably make a very poor choice. It is I who should be consulted, not you. There is property at stake. It is not a matter for affection. Affection comes later on in married life.

LORD GORING

Yes. In married life affection comes when people thoroughly dislike each other, father, doesn't it? [*Puts on Lord Caversham's cloak for him.*]

LORD CAVERSHAM

Certainly, sir. I mean certainly not, sir. You are talking very foolishly to-night. What I say is that marriage is a matter for common sense.

LORD GORING

But women who have common sense are so

curiously plain, father, aren't they? Of course I only speak from hearsay.

LORD CAVERSHAM

No woman, plain or pretty, has any common sense at all, sir. Common sense is the privilege of our own sex.

LORD GORING

Quite so. And we men are so self-sacrificing that we never use it, do we, father?

LORD CAVERSHAM

I use it, sir. I use nothing else.

LORD GORING

So my mother tells me.

LORD CAVERSHAM

It is the secret of your mother's happiness. You are very heartless, sir, very heartless.

LORD GORING

I hope not, father.

[*Goes out for a moment. Then returns, looking rather put out, with Sir Robert Chiltern.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

My dear Arthur, what a piece of good luck

meeting you on the doorstep! Your servant had just told me you were not at home. How extraordinary!

LORD GORING

The fact is, I am horribly busy to-night, Robert, and I gave orders I was not at home to anyone. Even my father had a comparatively cold reception. He complained of a draught the whole time.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Ah! you must be at home to me, Arthur. You are my best friend. Perhaps by to-morrow you will be my only friend. My wife has discovered everything.

LORD GORING

Ah! I guessed as much!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Looking at him.*] Really! How?

LORD GORING

[*After some hesitation.*] Oh, merely by something in the expression of your face as you came in. Who told her?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Mrs. Cheveley herself. And the woman I love knows that I began my career with an act of low dishonesty, that I built up my life upon sands of shame—that I sold, like a common huckster, the secret that had been intrusted to me as a man of honour. I thank heaven poor Lord Radley died without knowing that I betrayed him. I would to God I had died before I had been so horribly tempted, or had fallen so low. [*Burying his face in his hands.*]

LORD GORING

[*After a pause.*] You have heard nothing from Vienna yet, in answer to your wire?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Looking up.*] Yes; I got a telegram from the first secretary at eight o'clock to-night.

LORD GORING

Well?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Nothing is absolutely known against her. On the contrary, she occupies a rather high position in society. It is a sort of open secret that,

Baron Arnheim left her the greater portion of his immense fortune. Beyond that I can learn nothing.

LORD GORING

She doesn't turn out to be a spy, then?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Oh! spies are of no use nowadays. Their profession is over. The newspapers do their work instead.

LORD GORING

And thunderingly well they do it.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Arthur, I am parched with thirst. May I ring for something? Some hock and seltzer?

LORD GORING

Certainly. Let me. [*Rings the bell.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Thanks! I don't know what to do, Arthur, I don't know what to do, and you are my only friend. But what a friend you are—the one friend I can trust. I can trust you absolutely, can't I?

[*Enter Phipps.*]

LORD GORING

My dear Robert, of course. Oh! [*To Phipps.*] Bring some hock and seltzer.

PHIPPS

Yes, my lord.

LORD GORING

And Phipps!

PHIPPS

Yes, my lord.

LORD GORING

Will you excuse me for a moment, Robert? I want to give some directions to my servant.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Certainly.

LORD GORING

When that lady calls, tell her that I am not expected home this evening. Tell her that I have been suddenly called out of town. You understand?

PHIPPS

The lady is in that room, my lord. You told me to show her into that room, my lord.

LORD GORING

You did perfectly right. [*Exit Phipps.*] What a mess I am in. No; I think I shall get through it. I'll give her a lecture through the door. Awkward thing to manage, though.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Arthur, tell me what I should do. My life seems to have crumbled about me. I am a ship without a rudder in a night without a star.

LORD GORING

Robert, you love your wife, don't you?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I love her more than anything in the world. I used to think ambition the great thing. It is not. Love is the great thing in the world. There is nothing but love, and I love her. But I am defamed in her eyes. I am ignoble in her eyes. There is a wide gulf between us now. She has found me out, Arthur, she has found me out.

LORD GORING

Has she never in her life done some folly—some indiscretion—that she should not forgive your sin?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

My wife! Never! She does not know what weakness or temptation is. I am of clay like other men. She stands apart as good women do—pitiless in her perfection—cold and stern and without mercy. But I love her, Arthur. We are childless, and I have no one else to love, no one else to love me. Perhaps if God had sent us children she might have been kinder to me. But God has given us a lonely house. And she has cut my heart in two. Don't let us talk of it. I was brutal to her this evening. But I suppose when sinners talk to saints they are brutal always. I said to her things that were hideously true, on my side, from my standpoint, from the standpoint of men. But don't let us talk of that.

LORD GORING

Your wife will forgive you. Perhaps at this moment she is forgiving you. She loves you, Robert. Why should she not forgive?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

God grant it! God grant it! [*Buries his face in his hands.*] But there is something more I have to tell you, Arthur.

[*Enter Phipps with drinks.*]

PHIPPS

[*Hands hock and seltzer to Sir Robert Chiltern.*] Hock and seltzer, sir.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Thank you.

LORD GORING

Is your carriage here, Robert?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

No; I walked from the club.

LORD GORING

Sir Robert will take my cab, Phipps.

PHIPPS

Yes, my lord.

LORD GORING

Robert, you don't mind my sending you away?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Arthur, you must let me stay for five minutes. I have made up my mind what I am going to do to-night in the House. The debate on the Ar-

gentine Canal is to begin at eleven. [*A chair falls in the drawing-room.*] What is that?

LORD GORING

Nothing.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I heard a chair fall in the next room. Some one has been listening.

LORD GORING

No, no; there is no one there.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

There is some one. There are lights in the room, and the door is ajar. Some one has been listening to every secret of my life. Arthur, what does this mean?

LORD GORING

Robert, you are excited, unnerved. I tell you there is no one in that room. Sit down, Robert.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Do you give me your word that there is no one there?

LORD GORING

Yes.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Your word of honour? [*Sits down.*]

LORD GORING

Yes.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Rises.*] Arthur, let me see for myself.

LORD GORING

No, no.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

If there is no one there why should I not look in that room? Arthur, you must let me go into that room and satisfy myself. Let me know that no eavesdropper has heard my life's secret. Arthur, you don't realize what I am going through.

LORD GORING

Robert, this must stop. I have told you that there is no one in that room—that is enough.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Rushes to the door of the room.*] It is not enough. I insist on going into this room. You

have told me there is no one there, so what reason can you have for refusing me?

LORD GORING

For God's sake, don't! There is some one there. Some one whom you must not see.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Ah, I thought so!

LORD GORING

I forbid you to enter that room.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Stand back. My life is at stake. And I don't care who is there. I will know who it is to whom I have told my secret and my shame. [*Enters room.*]

LORD GORING

Great Heavens! his own wife!

[*Sir Robert Chiltern comes back, with a look of scorn and anger on his face.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

What explanation have you to give me for the presence of that woman here?

LORD GORING

Robert, I swear to you on my honour that that lady is stainless and guiltless of all offence towards you.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

She is a vile, an infamous thing!

LORD GORING

Don't say that, Robert! It was for your sake she came here. It was to try and save you she came here. She loves you and no one else.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

You are mad. What have I to do with her intrigues with you? Let her remain your mistress! You are well suited to each other. She, corrupt and shameful—you, false as a friend, treacherous as an enemy even——

LORD GORING

It is not true, Robert. Before heaven, it is not true. In her presence and in yours I will explain all.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Let me pass, sir. You have lied enough upon your word of honour.

[*Sir Robert Chiltern goes out. Lord Goring rushes to the door of the drawing-room, when Mrs. Cheveley comes out, looking radiant and much amused.*]

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*With a mock curtsey.*] Good evening, Lord Goring!

LORD GORING

Mrs. Cheveley! Great Heavens! May I ask what you were doing in my drawing-room?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Merely listening. I have a perfect passion for listening through keyholes. One always hears such wonderful things through them.

LORD GORING

Doesn't that sound rather like tempting Providence?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Oh, surely Providence can resist temptation by this time. [*Makes a sign to him to take her cloak off, which he does.*]

LORD GORING

I am glad you have called. I am going to give you some good advice.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Oh! pray don't. One should never give a woman anything that she can't wear in the evening.

LORD GORING

I see you are quite as wilful as you used to be.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Far more! I have greatly improved. I have had more experience.

LORD GORING

Too much experience is a dangerous thing. Pray have a cigarette. Half the pretty women in London smoke cigarettes. Personally I prefer the other half.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Thanks. I never smoke. My dressmaker wouldn't like it, and a woman's first duty in life is to her dressmaker, isn't it? What the second duty is, no one has as yet discovered.

LORD GORING

You have come here to sell me Robert Chiltern's letter, haven't you?

MRS. CHEVELEY

To offer it to you on conditions. How did you guess that?

LORD GORING

Because you haven't mentioned the subject. Have you got it with you?

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Sitting down.*] Oh, no! A well-made dress has no pockets.

LORD GORING

What is your price for it?

MRS. CHEVELEY

How absurdly English you are! The English think that a cheque-book can solve every problem in life. Why, my dear Arthur, I have very much more money than you have, and quite as much as Robert Chiltern has got hold of. Money is not what I want.

LORD GORING

What do you want then, Mrs. Cheveley?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Why don't you call me Laura?

LORD GORING

I don't like the name.

MRS. CHEVELEY

You used to adore it.

LORD GORING

Yes: that's why. [*Mrs. Cheveley motions to him to sit down beside her. He smiles, and does so.*]

MRS. CHEVELEY

Arthur, you loved me once.

LORD GORING

Yes.

MRS. CHEVELEY

And you asked me to be your wife.

LORD GORING

That was the natural result of my loving you.

MRS. CHEVELEY

And you threw me over because you saw, or said you saw, poor old Lord Mortlake trying to have a violent flirtation with me in the conservatory at Tenby.

LORD GORING

I am under the impression that my lawyer settled that matter with you on certains terms . . . dictated by yourself.

MRS. CHEVELEY

At that time I was poor; you were rich.

LORD GORING

Quite so. That is why you pretended to love me.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Shrugging her shoulders.*] Poor old Lord Mortlake, who had only two topics of conversation, his gout and his wife! I never could quite make out which of the two he was talking about. He used the most horrible language about them both. Well, you were silly, Arthur. Why, Lord Mortlake was never anything more to me than an amusement. One of those utterly tedi-

ous amusements one only finds at an English country house on an English country Sunday. I don't think anyone at all morally responsible for what he or she does at an English country house.

LORD GORING

Yes. I know lots of people think that.

MRS. CHEVELEY

I loved you, Arthur.

LORD GORING

My dear Mrs. Cheveley, you have always been far too clever to know anything about love.

MRS. CHEVELEY

I did love you. And you loved me. You know you loved me, and love is a very wonderful thing. I suppose that when a man has once loved a woman, he will do anything for her, except continue to love her? [*Puts her hand on his.*]

LORD GORING

[*Taking his hand away quietly.*] Yes; except that.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*After a pause.*] I am tired of living abroad. I want to come back to London. I want to have a charming house here. I want to have a salon. If one could only teach the English how to talk, and the Irish how to listen, society here would be quite civilized. Besides, I have arrived at the romantic stage. When I saw you last night at the Chilterns', I knew you were the only person I had ever cared for, if I ever have cared for anybody, Arthur. And so, on the morning of the day you marry me, I will give you Robert Chiltern's letter. That is my offer. I will give it to you now, if you promise to marry me.

LORD GORING

Now?

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Smiling.*] To-morrow.

LORD GORING

Are you really serious?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Yes, quite serious.

LORD GORING

I should make you a very bad husband.

MRS. CHEVELEY

I don't mind bad husbands. I have had two. They amused me immensely.

LORD GORING

You mean that you amused yourself immensely, don't you?

MRS CHEVELEY

What do you know about my married life?

LORD GORING

Nothing: but I can read it like a book.

MRS. CHEVELEY

What book?

LORD GORING

[*Rising.*] The Book of Numbers.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Do you think it quite charming of you to be so rude to a woman in your own house?

LORD GORING

In the case of very fascinating women, sex is a challenge, not a defense.

MRS. CHEVELEY

I suppose that is meant for a compliment. My dear Arthur, women are never disarmed by compliments. Men always are. That is the difference between the two sexes.

LORD GORING

Women are never disarmed by anything, as far as I know them.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*After a pause.*] Then you are going to allow your greatest friend, Robert Chiltern, to be ruined, rather than marry some one who really has considerable attractions left. I thought you would have risen to some great height of self-sacrifice, Arthur, I think you should. And the rest of your life you could spend in contemplating your own perfections.

LORD GORING

Oh! I do that as it is. And self-sacrifice is a thing that should be put down by law. It

is so demoralizing to the people for whom one sacrifices oneself. They always go to the bad.

MRS. CHEVELEY

As if anything could demoralize Robert Chiltern! You seem to forget that I know his real character.

LORD GORING

What you know about him is not his real character. It was an act of folly done in his youth, dishonourable, I admit, shameful, I admit, unworthy of him, I admit, and therefore . . . not his true character.

MRS. CHEVELEY

How you men stand up for each other!

LORD GORING

How you women war against each other!

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Bitterly.*] I only war against one woman, against Gertrude Chiltern. I hate her. I hate her now more than ever.

LORD GORING

Because you have brought a real tragedy into her life, I suppose.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*With a sneer.*] Oh, there is only one real tragedy in a woman's life. The fact that her past is always her lover, and her future invariably her husband.

LORD GORING

Lady Chiltern knows nothing of the kind of life to which you are alluding.

MRS. CHEVELEY

A woman whose size in gloves is seven and three-quarters never knows much about anything. You know Gertrude has always worn seven and three-quarters? That is one of the reasons why there was never any moral sympathy between us . . . Well, Arthur, I suppose this romantic interview may be regarded as at an end. You admit it was romantic, don't you? For the privilege of being your wife I was ready to surrender a great prize, the climax of my diplomatic career. You declined. Very well. If Sir Robert doesn't uphold my Argentine scheme, I expose him. *Voilà tout.*

LORD GORING

You mustn't do that. It would be vile, horrible, infamous.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Shrugging her shoulders.*] Oh! don't use big words. They mean so little. It is a commercial transaction. That is all. There is no good mixing up sentimentality in it. I offered to sell Robert Chiltern a certain thing. If he won't pay me my price, he will have to pay the world a greater price. There is no more to be said. I must go. Good-bye. Won't you shake hands?

LORD GORING

With you? No. Your transaction with Robert Chiltern may pass as a loathsome commercial transaction of a loathsome commercial age; but you seem to have forgotten that you who came here to-night to talk of love, you whose lips desecrated the word love, you to whom the thing is a book closely sealed, went this afternoon to the house of one of the most noble and gentle women in the world to degrade her husband in her eyes, to try and kill her love for him, to put poison in her heart, and bitter-

ness in her life, to break her idol and, it may be, spoil her soul. That I cannot forgive you. That was horrible. For that there can be no forgiveness.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Arthur, you are unjust to me. Believe me, you are quite unjust to me. I didn't go to taunt Gertrude at all. I had no idea of doing anything of the kind when I entered. I called with Lady Markby simply to ask whether an ornament, a jewel, that I lost somewhere last night, had been found at the Chilterns'. If you don't believe me, you can ask Lady Markby. She will tell you it is true. The scene that occurred happened after Lady Markby had left, and was really forced on me by Gertrude's rudeness and sneers. I called, oh!—a little out of malice if you like—but really to ask if a diamond brooch of mine had been found. That was the origin of the whole thing.

LORD GORING

A diamond snake-brooch with a ruby?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Yes. How do you know?

LORD GORING

Because it is found. In point of fact, I found it myself, and stupidly forgot to tell the butler anything about it as I was leaving. [*Goes over to the writing-table and pulls out the drawers.*] It is in this drawer. No, that one. This is the brooch, isn't it? [*Holds up the brooch.*]

MRS. CHEVELEY

Yes. I am so glad to get it back. It was . . . a present.

LORD GORING

Won't you wear it?

MRS. CHEVELEY

Certainly, if you pin it in. [*Lord Goring suddenly clasps it on her arm.*] Why do you put it on as a bracelet? I never knew it could be worn as a bracelet.

LORD GORING

Really?

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Holding out her handsome arm.*] No; but it looks very well on me as a bracelet, doesn't it?

LORD GORING

Yes; much better than when I saw it last.

MRS. CHEVELEY

When did you see it last?

LORD GORING

[*Calmly.*] Oh, ten years ago, on Lady Berkshire, from whom you stole it.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Starting.*] What do you mean?

LORD GORING

I mean that you stole that ornament from my cousin, Mary Berkshire, to whom I gave it when she was married. Suspicion fell on a wretched servant, who was sent away in disgrace. I recognized it last night. I determined to say nothing about it till I had found the thief. I have found the thief now, and I have heard her own confession.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Tossing her head.*] It is not true.

LORD GORING

You know it is true. Why, thief is written across your face at this moment.

MRS. CHEVELEY

I will deny the whole affair from beginning to end. I will say that I have never seen this wretched thing, that it was never in my possession.

[*Mrs. Cheveley tries to get the bracelet off her arm, but fails. Lord Goring looks on amused. Her thin fingers tear at the jewel to no purpose. A curse breaks from her.*]

LORD GORING

The drawback of stealing a thing, Mrs. Cheveley, is that one never knows how wonderful the thing that one steals is. You can't get that bracelet off, unless you know where the spring is. And I see you don't know where the spring is. It is rather difficult to find.

MRS. CHEVELEY

You brute! You coward! [*She tries again to unclasp the bracelet, but fails.*]

LORD GORING

Oh! don't use big words. They mean so little.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Again tears at the bracelet in a paroxysm of*

rage, with inarticulate sounds. Then stops, and looks at Lord Goring.] What are you going to do?

LORD GORING

I am going to ring for my servant. He is an admirable servant. Always comes in the moment one rings for him. When he comes I will tell him to fetch the police.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Trembling.*] The police? What for?

LORD GORING

To-morrow the Berkshires will prosecute you. That is what the police are for.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Is now in an agony of physical terror. . . . Her face is distorted. Her mouth awry. A mask has fallen from her. She is, for the moment, dreadful to look at.*] Don't do that. I will do anything you want. Anything in the world you want.

LORD GORING

Give me Robert Chiltern's letter.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Stop! Stop! Let me have time to think.

LORD GORING

Give me Robert Chiltern's letter.

MRS. CHEVELEY

I have not got it with me. I will give it to you to-morrow.

LORD GORING

You know you are lying. Give it to me at once. [*Mrs. Cheveley pulls the letter out, and hands it to him. She is horribly pale.*] This is it?

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*In a hoarse voice.*] Yes.

LORD GORING

[*Takes the letter, examines it, sighs, and burns it over the lamp.*] For so well-dressed a woman, Mrs. Cheveley, you have moments of admirable common sense. I congratulate you.

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Catches sight of Lady Chiltern's letter, the cover of which is just showing from under the blotting-book.*] Please get me a glass of water.

LORD GORING

Certainly. [*Goes to the corner of the room and pours out a glass of water. While his back is turned Mrs. Cheveley steals Lady Chiltern's letter. When Lord Goring returns with the glass she refuses it with a gesture.*]

MRS. CHEVELEY

Thank you. Will you help me on with my cloak?

LORD GORING

With pleasure. [*Puts her cloak on.*]

MRS. CHEVELEY

Thanks. I am never going to try to harm Robert Chiltern again.

LORD GORING

Fortunately you have not the chance, Mrs. Cheveley.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Well, if even I had the chance, I wouldn't. On the contrary, I am going to render him a great service.

LORD GORING

I am charmed to hear it. It is a reformation.

MRS. CHEVELEY

Yes. I can't bear so upright a gentleman, so honourable an English gentleman, being so shamefully deceived, and so——

LORD GORING

Well?

MRS. CHEVELEY

I find that somehow Gertrude Chiltern's dying speech and confession has strayed into my pocket.

LORD GORING

What do you mean?

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*With a bitter note of triumph in her voice.*] I mean that I am going to send Robert Chiltern the love letter his wife wrote to you to-night.

LORD GORING

Love letter?

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*Laughing.*] "I want you. I trust you. I am coming to you. Gertrude."

[*Lord Goring rushes to the bureau and takes the envelope, finds it empty, and turns round.*]

LORD GORING

You wretched woman, must you always be thieving? Give me back that letter. I'll take it from you by force. You shall not leave my room till I have got it.

[*He rushes towards her, but Mrs. Cheveley at once puts her hand on the electric bell that is on the table. The bell sounds with shrill reverberations, and Phipps enters.*]

MRS. CHEVELEY

[*After a pause.*] Lord Goring merely rang that you should show me out. Good-night, Lord Goring!

[*Goes out, followed by Phipps. Her face is illumined with evil triumph. There is joy in her eyes. Youth seems to have come back to her. Her last glance is like a swift arrow. Lord Goring bites his lip, and lights a cigarette.*]

ACT-DROP.

FOURTH ACT.

SCENE—*Same as Act II.*

[*Lord Goring is standing by the fireplace with his hands in his pockets. He is looking rather bored.*]

LORD GORING

[*Pulls out his watch, inspects it, and rings the bell.*] It is a great nuisance. I can't find anyone in this house to talk to. And I am full of interesting information. I feel like the latest edition of something or other.

[*Enter servant.*]

JAMES

Sir Robert is still at the Foreign Office, my lord.

LORD GORING

Lady Chiltern not down yet?

JAMES

Her ladyship has not yet left her room. Miss Chiltern has just come in from riding.

LORD GORING

[*To himself.*] Ah! that is something.

JAMES

Lord Caversham has been waiting some time in the library for Sir Robert. I told him your lordship was here.

LORD GORING

Thank you. Would you kindly tell him I've gone?

JAMES

[*Bowing.*] I shall do so, my lord.

[*Exit Servant.*]

LORD GORING

Really, I don't want to meet my father three days running. It is a great deal too much excitement for any son. I hope to goodness he won't come up. Fathers should be neither seen

nor heard. That is the only proper basis for family life. Mothers are different. Mothers are darlings. [*Throws himself down into a chair, picks up a paper and begins to read it.*]

[*Enter Lord Caversham.*]

LORD CAVERSHAM

Well, sir, what are you doing here? Wasting your time as usual, I suppose?

LORD GORING

[*Throws down paper and rises.*] My dear father, when one pays a visit it is for the purpose of wasting other people's time, not one's own.

LORD CAVERSHAM

Have you been thinking over what I spoke to you about last night?

LORD GORING

I have been thinking about nothing else.

LORD CAVERSHAM

Engaged to be married yet?

LORD GORING

[*Genially.*] Not yet: but I hope to be before lunch-time.

LORD CAVERSHAM

[*Caustically.*] You can have till dinner-time if it would be of any convenience to you.

LORD GORING

Thanks awfully, but I think I'd sooner be engaged before lunch.

LORD CAVERSHAM

Humph! Never know when you are serious or not.

LORD GORING

Neither do I, father.

[*A pause.*]

LORD CAVERSHAM

I suppose you have read "The Times" this morning?

LORD GORING

[*Airily.*] "The Times"? Certainly not. I only read "The Morning Post." All that one should know about modern life is where the Duchesses are; anything else is quite demoralizing.

LORD CAVERSHAM

Do you mean to say you have not read "The Times" leading article on Robert Chiltern's career?

LORD GORING

Good heavens! No. What does it say?

LORD CAVERSHAM

What should it say, sir? Everything complimentary, of course. Chiltern's speech last night on this Argentine Canal Scheme was one of the finest pieces of oratory ever delivered in the House since Canning.

LORD GORING

Ah! Never heard of Canning. Never wanted to. And did . . . did Chiltern uphold the scheme?

LORD CAVERSHAM

Uphold it, sir? How little you know him! Why, he denounced it roundly, and the whole system of modern political finance. This speech is the turning-point in his career, as "The Times" points out. You should read this article sir. [*Opens "The Times."*] "Sir Robert

Chiltern . . . most rising of all our young statesmen . . . Brilliant orator . . . Unblemished career . . . Well-known integrity of character . . . Represents what is best in English public life . . . Noble contrast to the lax morality so common among foreign politicians." They will never say that of you, sir.

LORD GORING

I sincerely hope not, father. However, I am delighted at what you tell me about Robert, thoroughly delighted. It shows he has got pluck.

LORD CAVERSHAM

He has got more than pluck, sir, he has got genius.

LORD GORING

Ah! I prefer pluck. It is not so common, nowadays, as genius is.

LORD CAVERSHAM

I wish you would go into Parliament?

LORD GORING

My dear father, only people who look dull

ever get into the House of Commons, and only people who are dull ever succeed there.

LORD CAVERSHAM

Why don't you try to do something useful in life?

LORD GORING

I am far too young.

LORD CAVERSHAM

[*Testily.*] I hate this affectation of youth, sir. It is a great deal too prevalent nowadays.

LORD GORING

Youth isn't an affectation. Youth is an art.

LORD CAVERSHAM

Why don't you propose to that pretty Miss Chiltern?

LORD GORING

I am of a very nervous disposition, especially in the morning.

LORD CAVERSHAM

I don't suppose there is the smallest chance of her accepting you.

LORD GORING

I don't know how the betting stands to-day.

LORD CAVERSHAM

If she did accept you she would be the prettiest fool in England.

LORD GORING

That is just what I should like to marry. A thoroughly sensible wife would reduce me to a condition of absolute idiocy in less than six months.

LORD CAVERSHAM

You don't deserve her, sir.

LORD GORING

My dear father, if we men married the women we deserved, we should have a very bad time of it.

[*Enter Mabel Chiltern.*]

MABEL CHILTERN

Oh! . . . How do you do, Lord Caversham? I hope Lady Caversham is quite well?

LORD CAVERSHAM

Lady Caversham is as usual, as usual.

LORD GORING

Good morning, Miss Mabel!

MABEL CHILTERN

[*Taking no notice at all of Lord Goring, and addressing herself exclusively to Lord Caversham.*] And Lady Caversham's bonnets . . . are they at all better?

LORD CAVERSHAM

They have had a serious relapse, I am sorry to say.

LORD GORING

Good morning, Miss Mabel!

MABEL CHILTERN

[*To Lord Caversham.*] I hope an operation will not be necessary.

LORD CAVERSHAM

[*Smiling at her pertness.*] If it is we shall have to give Lady Caversham a narcotic. Otherwise she would never consent to have a feather touched.

LORD GORING

[*With increased emphasis.*] Good morning, Miss Mabel!

MABEL CHILTERN

[*Turning round with feigned surprise.*] Oh, are you here? Of course you understand that after your breaking your appointment I am never going to speak to you again.

LORD GORING

Oh, please don't say such a thing. You are the one person in London I really like to have to listen to me.

MABEL CHILTERN

Lord Goring, I never believe a single word that either you or I say to each other.

LORD CAVERSHAM

You are quite right, my dear, quite right . . . as far as he is concerned, I mean.

MABEL CHILTERN

Do you think you could possibly make your son behave a little better occasionally? Just as a change.

LORD CAVERSHAM

I regret to say, Miss Chiltern, that I have no influence at all over my son. I wish I had. If I had, I know what I would make him do.

MABEL CHILTERN

I am afraid that he has one of those terribly weak natures that are not susceptible to influence.

LORD CAVERSHAM

He is very heartless, very heartless.

LORD GORING

It seems to me that I am a little in the way here.

MABEL CHILTERN

It is very good for you to be in the way, and to know what people say of you behind your back.

LORD GORING

I don't at all like knowing what people say of me behind my back. It makes me far too conceited.

LORD CAVERSHAM

After that, my dear, I really must bid you good morning.

MABEL CHILTERN

Oh! I hope you are not going to leave me all alone with Lord Goring? Especially at such an early hour in the day.

LORD CAVERSHAM

I am afraid I can't take him with me to Downing Street. It is not the Prime Minister's day for seeing the unemployed.

[*Shakes hands with Mabel Chiltern, takes up his hat and stick, and goes out, with a parting glare of indignation at Lord Goring.*]

MABEL CHILTERN

[*Takes up roses and begins to arrange them in a bowl on the table.*] People who don't keep their appointments in the Park are horrid.

LORD GORING

Detestable.

MABEL CHILTERN

I am glad you admit it. But I wish you wouldn't look so pleased about it.

LORD GORING

I can't help it. I always look pleased when I am with you.

MABEL CHILTERN

[*Sadly.*] Then I suppose it is my duty to remain with you?

LORD GORING

Of course it is.

MABEL CHILTERN

Well, my duty is a thing I never do, on principle. It always depresses me. So I am afraid I must leave you.

LORD GORING

Please don't, Miss Mabel. I have something very particular to say to you.

MABEL CHILTERN

[*Rapturously.*] Oh! is it a proposal?

LORD GORING

[*Somewhat taken aback.*] Well, yes, it is—I am bound to say it is.

MABEL CHILTERN

[*With a sigh of pleasure.*] I am so glad. That makes the second to-day.

LORD GORING

[*Indignantly.*] The second to-day? What conceited ass has been impertinent enough to dare to propose to you before I had proposed to you?

MABEL CHILTERN

Tommy Trafford, of course. It is one of Tommy's days for proposing. He always proposes on Tuesdays and Thursdays, during the season.

LORD GORING

You didn't accept him, I hope?

MABEL CHILTERN

I make it a rule never to accept Tommy. That is why he goes on proposing. Of course, as you didn't turn up this morning, I very nearly said yes. It would have been an excellent lesson both for him and for you if I had. It would have taught you both better manners.

" 'Oh! bother Tommy Trafford.' "

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LORD GORING

Oh! bother Tommy Trafford. Tommy is a silly little ass. I love you.

MABEL CHILTERN

I know. And I think you might have mentioned it before. I am sure I have given you heaps of opportunities.

LORD GORING

Mabel, do be serious. Please be serious.

MABEL CHILTERN

Ah! that is the sort of thing a man always says to a girl before he has been married to her. He never says it afterwards.

LORD GORING

[*Taking hold of her hand.*] Mabel, I have told you that I love you. Can't you love me a little in return?

MABEL CHILTERN

You silly Arthur! If you knew anything about . . . anything, which you don't, you would know that I adore you. Everyone in London knows it except you. It is a public scandal the way I adore you. I have been going

about for the last six months telling the whole of society that I adore you. I wonder you consent to have anything to say to me. I have no character left at all. At least, I feel so happy that I am quite sure I have no character left at all.

LORD GORING

[*Catches her in his arms and kisses her. Then there is a pause of bliss.*] Dear! Do you know I was awfully afraid of being refused!

MABEL CHILTERN

[*Looking up at him.*] But you never have been refused yet by anybody, have you, Arthur? I can't imagine anyone refusing you.

LORD GORING

[*After kissing her again.*] Of course I'm not nearly good enough for you, Mabel.

MABEL CHILTERN

[*Nestling close to him.*] I am so glad, darling. I was afraid you were.

LORD GORING

[*After some hesitation.*] And I'm . . . I'm a little over thirty.

MABEL CHILTERN

Dear, you look weeks younger that that.

LORD GORING

[*Enthusiastically.*] How sweet of you to say so! . . . And it is only fair to tell you frankly that I am fearfully extravagant.

MABEL CHILTERN

But so am I, Arthur. So we're sure to agree. And now I must go and see Gertrude.

LORD GORING

Must you really? [*Kisses her.*]

MABEL CHILTERN

Yes.

LORD GORING

Then do tell her I want to talk to her particularly. I have been waiting here all the morning to see either her or Robert.

MABEL CHILTERN

Do you mean to say you didn't come here expressly to propose to me?

LORD GORING

[*Triumphantly.*] No, that was a flash of genius.

MABEL CHILTERN

Your first.

LORD GORING

[*With determination.*] My last.

MABEL CHILTERN

I am delighted to hear it. Now don't stir. I'll be back in five minutes. And don't fall into any temptations while I am away.

LORD GORING

Dear Mabel, while you are away, there are none. It makes me horribly dependent on you.

[*Enter Lady Chiltern.*]

LADY CHILTERN

Good morning, dear. How pretty you are looking!

MABEL CHILTERN

How pale you are looking, Gertrude! It is most becoming!

LADY CHILTERN

Good morning, Lord Goring!

LORD GORING

[*Bowing.*] Good morning, Lady Chiltern!

MABEL CHILTERN

[*Aside to Lord Goring.*] I shall be in the conservatory, under the second palm tree on the left.

LORD GORING

Second on the left?

MABEL CHILTERN

[*With a look of mock surprise.*] Yes; the usual palm tree.

[*Blows a kiss to him, unobserved by Lady Chiltern, and goes out.*]

LORD GORING

Lady Chiltern, I have a certain amount of very good news to tell you. Mrs. Cheveley gave me up Robert's letter last night, and I burned it. Robert is safe.

LADY CHILTERN

[*Sinking on the sofa.*] Safe! Oh! I am

so glad of that. What a good friend you are to him—to us!

LORD GORING

There is only one person now that could be said to be in any danger.

LADY CHILTERN

Who is that?

LORD GORING

[*Sitting down beside her.*] Yourself.

LADY CHILTERN

I! In danger? What do you mean?

LORD GORING

Danger is too great a word. It is a word I should not have used. But I admit I have something to tell you that may distress you, that terribly distresses me. Yesterday evening you wrote me a very beautiful, womanly letter, asking me for my help. You wrote to me as one of your oldest friends, one of your husband's oldest friends. Mrs. Cheveley stole that letter from my rooms.

LADY CHILTERN

Well, what use is it to her? Why should she not have it?

LORD GORING

[*Rising.*] Lady Chiltern, I will be quite frank with you. Mrs. Cheveley puts a certain construction on that letter and proposes to send it to your husband.

LADY CHILTERN

But what construction could she put on it? . . . Oh! not that! not that! If I in—in trouble, and wanting your help, trusting you, propose to come to you . . . that you may advise me . . . assist me . . . Oh! are there women so horrible as that . . . ? And she proposes to send it to my husband? Tell me what happened. Tell me all that happened.

LORD GORING

Mrs. Cheveley was concealed in a room adjoining my library, without my knowledge. I thought that the person who was waiting in that room to see me was yourself. Robert came in unexpectedly. A chair or something fell in the room. He forced his way in, and he discovered her. We had a terrible scene. I still thought

it was you. He left me in anger. At the end of everything Mrs. Cheveley got possession of your letter—she stole it, when or how, I don't know.

LADY CHILTERN

At what hour did this happen?

LORD GORING

At half-past ten. And now I propose that we tell Robert the whole thing at once.

LADY CHILTERN

[*Looking at him with amazement that is almost terror.*] You want me to tell Robert that the woman you expected was not Mrs. Cheveley, but myself? That it was I whom you thought was concealed in a room in your house, at half-past ten o'clock at night? You want me to tell him that?

LORD GORING

I think it is better that he should know the exact truth.

LADY CHILTERN

[*Rising.*] Oh, I couldn't, I couldn't!

LORD GORING

May I do it?

LADY CHILTERN

No.

LORD GORING

[*Gravely.*] You are wrong, Lady Chiltern.

LADY CHILTERN

No. The letter must be intercepted. That is all. But how can I do it? Letters arrive for him every moment of the day. His secretaries open them and hand them to him. I dare not ask the servants to bring me his letters. It would be impossible. Oh! why don't you tell me what to do?

LORD GORING

Pray be calm, Lady Chiltern, and answer the questions I am going to put to you. You said his secretaries open his letters.

LADY CHILTERN

Yes.

LORD GORING

Who is with him to-day? Mr. Trafford, isn't it?

LADY CHILTERN

No. Mr. Montfort, I think.

LORD GORING

You can trust him?

LADY CHILTERN

[*With a gesture of despair.*] Oh! how do I know?

LORD GORING

He would do what you asked him, wouldn't he?

LADY CHILTERN

I think so.

LORD GORING

Your letter was on pink paper. He could recognize it without reading it, couldn't he? By the colour?

LADY CHILTERN

I suppose so.

LORD GORING

Is he in the house now?

LADY CHILTERN

Yes.

LORD GORING

Then I will go and see him myself, and tell him that a certain letter, written on pink paper, is to be forwarded to Robert to-day, and that at all costs it must not reach him. [*Goes to the door, and opens it.*] Oh! Robert is coming upstairs with the letter in his hand. It has reached him already.

LADY CHILTERN

[*With a cry of pain.*] Oh! you have saved his life; what have you done with mine!

[*Enter Sir Robert Chiltern. He has the letter in his hand, and is reading it. He comes towards his wife, not noticing Lord Goring's presence.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

"I want you. I trust you. I am coming to you. Gertrude." Oh, my love! Is this true? Do you indeed trust me, and want me? If so, it was for me to come to you, not for you to

write of coming to me. This letter of yours, Gertrude, makes me feel that nothing that the world may do can hurt me now. You want me, Gertrude?

[*Lord Goring, unseen by Sir Robert Chiltern, makes an imploring sign to Lady Chiltern to accept the situation and Sir Robert's error.*]

LADY CHILTERN

Yes.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

You trust me, Gertrude?

LADY CHILTERN

Yes.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Ah! why did you not add you loved me?

LADY CHILTERN

[*Taking his hand.*] Because I loved you.

[*Lord Goring passes into the conservatory.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Kisses her.*] Gertrude, you don't know what I feel. When Montfort passed me your letter across the table—he had opened it by mistake,

I suppose, without looking at the handwriting on the envelope—and I read it—oh! I did not care what disgrace or punishment was in store for me, I only thought you loved me still.

LADY CHILTERN

There is no disgrace in store for you, nor any public shame. Mrs. Cheveley has handed over to Lord Goring the document that was in her possession, and he has destroyed it.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Are you sure of this, Gertrude?

LADY CHILTERN

Yes; Lord Goring has just told me.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Then I am safe! Oh! what a wonderful thing to be safe! For two days I have been in terror. I am safe now. How did Arthur destroy my letter? Tell me.

LADY CHILTERN

He burned it.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I wish I had seen that one sin of my youth

burning to ashes. How many men there are in modern life who would like to see their past burning to white ashes before them! Is Arthur still here?

LADY CHILTERN

Yes; he is in the conservatory.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I am so glad now I made that speech last night in the House, so glad. I made it thinking that public disgrace might be the result. But it has not been so.

LADY CHILTERN

Public honour has been the result.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I think so. I fear so, almost. For although I am safe from detection, although every proof against me is destroyed, I suppose, Gertrude . . . I suppose I should retire from public life? [*He looks anxiously at his wife.*]

LADY CHILTERN

[*Eagerly.*] Oh yes, Robert, you should do that. It is your duty to do that.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

It is much to surrender.

LADY CHILTERN

No; it will be much to gain.

[*Sir Robert Chiltern walks up and down the room with a troubled expression. Then comes over to his wife, and puts his hand on her shoulder.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

And you would be happy living somewhere alone with me, abroad perhaps, or in the country away from London, away from public life? You would have no regrets?

LADY CHILTERN

Oh! none, Robert.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Sadly.*] And your ambition for me? You used to be ambitious for me.

LADY CHILTERN

Oh! my ambition! I have none now, but that we two may love each other. It was your ambition that led you astray. Let us not talk about ambition.

[*Lord Goring returns from the conservatory, looking very pleased with himself, and with an entirely new buttonhole that some one has made for him.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Going towards him.*] Arthur, I have to thank you for what you have done for me. I don't know how I can repay you. [*Shakes hands with him.*]

LORD GORING

My dear fellow, I'll tell you at once. At the present moment, under the usual palm tree . . . I mean in the conservatory . . .

[*Enter Mason.*]

MASON

Lord Caversham.

LORD GORING

That admirable father of mine really makes a habit of turning up at the wrong moment. It is very heartless of him, very heartless indeed.

[*Enter Lord Caversham. Mason goes out.*]

LORD CAVERSHAM

Good morning, Lady Chiltern! Warmest con-

gratulations to you, Chiltern, on your brilliant speech last night. I have just left the Prime Minister, and you are to have the vacant seat in the Cabinet.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*With a look of joy and triumph.*] A seat in the Cabinet?

LORD CAVERSHAM

Yes; here is the Prime Minister's letter. [*Hands letter.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Takes letter and reads.*] A seat in the Cabinet!

LORD CAVERSHAM

Certainly, and you well deserve it too. You have got what we want so much in political life nowadays—high character, high moral tone, high principles. [*To Lord Goring.*] Everything that you have not got, sir, and never will have.

LORD GORING

I don't like principles, father. I prefer prejudices.

[*Sir Robert Chiltern is on the brink of accepting the Prime Minister's offer, when he sees his wife looking at him with her clear, candid eyes. He then realizes that it is impossible.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I cannot accept this offer, Lord Caversham. I have made up my mind to decline it.

LORD CAVERSHAM

Decline it, sir!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

My intention is to retire at once from public life.

LORD CAVERSHAM

[*Angrily.*] Decline a seat in the Cabinet, and retire from public life? Never heard such damned nonsense in the whole course of my existence. I beg your pardon, Lady Chiltern. Chiltern, I beg your pardon. [*To Lord Goring.*] Don't grin like that, sir.

LORD GORING

No, father.

LORD CAVERSHAM

Lady Chiltern, you are a sensible woman, the

most sensible woman in London, the most sensible woman I know. Will you kindly prevent your husband from making such a . . . from talking such . . . Will you kindly do that, Lady Chiltern?

LADY CHILTERN

I think my husband is right in his determination, Lord Caversham. I approve of it.

LORD CAVERSHAM

You approve of it? Good Heavens!

LADY CHILTERN

[*Taking her husband's hand.*] I admire him for it. I admire him immensely for it. I have never admired him so much before. He is finer then even I thought him. [*To Sir Robert Chiltern.*] You will go and write your letter to the Prime Minister now, won't you? Don't hesitate about it, Robert.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*With a touch of bitterness.*] I suppose I had better write it at once. Such offers are not repeated. I will ask you to excuse me for a moment, Lord Caversham.

LADY CHILTERN

I may come with you, Robert, may I not?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Yes, Gertrude.

[*Lady Chiltern goes out with him.*]

LORD CAVERSHAM

What is the matter with this family? Something wrong here, eh? [*Tapping his forehead.*] Idiocy? Hereditary, I suppose. Both of them, too. Wife as well as husband. Very sad. Very sad indeed! And they are not an old family. Can't understand it.

LORD GORING

It is not idiocy, father, I assure you.

LORD CAVERSHAM

What is it then, sir?

LORD GORING

[*After some hesitation.*] Well, it is what is called nowadays a high moral tone, father. That is all.

LORD CAVERSHAM

Hate these new-fangled names. Same thing

as we used to call idiocy fifty years ago. Shan't stay in this house any longer.

LORD GORING

[*Taking his arm.*] Oh! just go in here for a moment, father. Third palm tree to the left, the usual palm tree.

LORD CAVERSHAM

What, sir?

LORD GORING

I beg your pardon, father, I forgot. The conservatory, father, the conservatory—there is some one there I want you to talk to.

LORD CAVERSHAM

What about, sir?

LORD GORING

About me, father.

LORD CAVERSHAM

[*Grimly.*] Not a subject on which much eloquence is possible.

LORD GORING

No, father; but the lady is like me. She

doesn't care much for eloquence in others. She thinks it a little loud.

[*Lord Caversham goes into the conservatory. Lady Chiltern enters.*]

LORD GORING

Lady Chiltern, why are you playing Mrs. Cheveley's cards?

LADY CHILTERN

[*Startled.*] I don't understand you.

LORD GORING

Mrs. Cheveley made an attempt to ruin your husband. Either to drive him from public life, or to make him adopt a dishonourable position. From the latter tragedy you saved him. The former you are now thrusting on him. Why should you do him the wrong Mrs. Cheveley tried to do and failed?

LADY CHILTERN

Lord Goring?

LORD GORING

[*Pulling himself together for a great effort, and showing the philosopher that underlies the dandy.*] Lady Chiltern, allow me. You wrote

me a letter last night in which you said you trusted me and wanted my help. Now is the moment when you really want my help, now is the time when you have got to trust me, to trust in my counsel and judgment. You love Robert. Do you want to kill his love for you? What sort of existence will he have if you rob him of the fruits of his ambition, if you take him from the splendour of a great political career, if you close the doors of public life against him, if you condemn him to sterile failure, he who was made for triumph and success? Women are not meant to judge us, but to forgive us when we need forgiveness. Pardon, not punishment, is their mission. Why should you scourge him with rods for a sin done in his youth, before he knew you, before he knew himself? A man's life is of more value than a woman's. It has larger issues, wider scope, greater ambitions. A woman's life revolves in curves of emotions. It is upon lines of intellect that a man's life progresses. Don't make any terrible mistake, Lady Chiltern. A woman who can keep a man's love, and love him in return, has done all the world wants of women, or should want of them.

LADY CHILTERN

[*Troubled and hesitating.*] But it is my husband himself who wishes to retire from public life. He feels it is his duty. It was he who first said so.

LORD GORING

Rather than lose your love, Robert would do anything, wreck his whole career, as he is on the brink of doing now. He is making for you a terrible sacrifice. Take my advice, Lady Chiltern, and do not accept a sacrifice so great. If you do, you will live to repent it bitterly. We men and women are not made to accept such sacrifices from each other. We are not worthy of them. Besides, Robert has been punished enough.

LADY CHILTERN

We have both been punished. I set him up too high.

LORD GORING

[*With deep feeling in his voice.*] Do not for that reason set him down now too low. If he has fallen from his altar, do not thrust him into the mire. Failure to Robert would be the very

mire of shame. Power is his passion. He would lose everything, even his power to feel love. Your husband's life is at this moment in your hands, your husband's love is in your hands. Don't mar both for him.

[*Enter Sir Robert Chiltern.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Gertrude, here is the draft of my letter. Shall I read it to you?

LADY CHILTERN

Let me see it.

[*Sir Robert hands her the letter. She reads it, and then, with a gesture of passion, tears it up.*]

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

What are you doing?

LADY CHILTERN

A man's life is of more value than a woman's. It has larger issues, wider scope, greater ambitions. Our lives revolve in curves of emotions. It is upon lines of intellect that a man's life progresses. I have just learnt this, and much else with it, from Lord Goring. And I will not

spoil your life for you, nor see you spoil it as a sacrifice to me, a useless sacrifice!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Gertrude! Gertrude!

LADY CHILTERN

You can forget. Men easily forget. And I forgive. That is how women help the world. I see that now.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Deeply overcome by emotion, embraces her.*] My wife! my wife! [*To Lord Goring.*] Arthur, it seems that I am always to be in your debt.

LORD GORING

Oh dear no, Robert. Your debt is to Lady Chiltern, not to me!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

I owe you much. And now tell me what you were going to ask me just now as Lord Caversham came in.

LORD GORING

Robert, you are your sister's guardian, and I want your consent to my marriage with her. That is all.

LADY CHILTERN

Oh, I am so glad! I am so glad! [*Shakes hands with Lord Goring.*]

LORD GORING

Thank you, Lady Chiltern.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*With a troubled look.*] My sister to be your wife?

LORD GORING

Yes.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Speaking with great firmness.*] Arthur, I am very sorry, but the thing is quite out of the question. I have to think of Mabel's future happiness. And I don't think her happiness would be safe in your hands. And I cannot have her sacrificed!

LORD GORING

Sacrificed!

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Yes, utterly sacrificed. Loveless marriages are horrible. But there is one thing worse than

an absolutely loveless marriage. A marriage in which there is love, but on one side only; faith, but on one side only; devotion, but on one side only, and in which of the two hearts one is sure to be broken.

LORD GORING

But I love Mabel. No other woman has any place in my life.

LADY CHILTERN

Robert, if they love each other, why should they not be married?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Arthur cannot bring Mabel the love that she deserves.

LORD GORING

What reason have you for saying that?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*After a pause.*] Do you really require me to tell you?

LORD GORING

Certainly I do.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

As you choose. When I called on you yesterday evening I found Mrs. Cheveley concealed in your rooms. It was between ten and eleven o'clock at night. I do not wish to say anything more. Your relations with Mrs. Cheveley have, as I said to you last night, nothing whatsoever to do with me. I know you were engaged to be married to her once. The fascination she exercised over you then seems to have returned. You spoke to me last night of her as of a woman pure and stainless, a woman whom you respected and honoured. That may be so. But I cannot give my sister's life into your hands. It would be wrong of me. It would be unjust, infamously unjust to her.

LORD GORING

I have nothing more to say.

LADY CHILTERN

Robert, it was not Mrs. Cheveley whom Lord Goring expected last night.

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

Not Mrs. Cheveley! Who was it then?

LORD GORING

Lady Chiltern.

LADY CHILTERN

It was your own wife. Robert, yesterday afternoon Lord Goring told me that if ever I was in trouble I could come to him for help, as he was our oldest and best friend. Later on, after that terrible scene in this room, I wrote to him telling him that I trusted him, that I had need of him, that I was coming to him for help and advice. [*Sir Robert Chiltern takes the letter out of his pocket.*] Yes, that letter. I didn't go to Lord Goring's, after all. I felt that it is from ourselves alone that help can come. Pride made me think that. Mrs. Cheveley went. She stole my letter and sent it anonymously to you this morning, that you should think . . . Oh! Robert, I cannot tell you what she wished you to think. . . .

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

What! Had I fallen so low in your eyes that you thought that even for a moment I could have doubted your goodness? Gertrude, Gertrude, you are to me the white image of all good things, and sin can never touch you. Arthur,

you can go to Mabel, and you have my best wishes! Oh! stop a moment. There is no name at the beginning of this letter. The brilliant Mrs. Cheveley does not seem to have noticed that. There should be a name.

LADY CHILTERN

Let me write yours. It is you I trust and need. You and none else.

LORD GORING

Well, really, Lady Chiltern, I think I should have back my own letter.

LADY CHILTERN

[*Smiling.*] No; you shall have Mabel. [*Takes the letter and writes her husband's name on it.*]

LORD GORING

Well, I hope she hasn't changed her mind. It's nearly twenty minutes since I saw her last.

[*Enter Mabel Chiltern and Lord Caversham.*]

MABEL CHILTERN

Lord Goring, I think your father's conversation much more improving than yours. I am only going to talk to Lord Caversham in the future, and always under the usual palm tree.

LORD GORING

Darling! [*Kisses her.*]

LORD CAVERSHAM

[*Considerably taken aback.*] What does this mean, sir? You don't mean to say that this charming, clever young lady, has been so foolish as to accept you?

LORD GORING

Certainly, father! And Chiltern's been wise enough to accept the seat in the Cabinet.

LORD CAVERSHAM

I am very glad to hear that, Chiltern . . . I congratulate you, sir. If the country doesn't go to the dogs or the Radicals, we shall have you Prime Minister, some day.

[*Enter Mason.*]

MASON

Luncheon is on the table, my Lady!

[*Mason goes out.*]

LADY CHILTERN

You'll stop to luncheon, Lord Caversham, won't you?

LORD CAVERSHAM

With pleasure, and I'll drive you down to Downing Street afterwards, Chiltern. You have a great future before you, a great future. Wish I could say the same for you, sir. [*To Lord Goring.*] But your career will have to be entirely domestic.

LORD GORING

Yes, father, I prefer it domestic.

LORD CAVERSHAM

And if you don't make this young lady an ideal husband, I'll cut you off with a shilling.

MABEL CHILTERN

An ideal husband! Oh, I don't think I should like that. It sounds like something in the next world.

LORD CAVERSHAM

What do you want him to be then, dear?

MABEL CHILTERN

He can be what he chooses. All I want is to be . . . to be . . . oh! a real wife to him.

LORD CAVERSHAM

Upon my word, there is a good deal of common sense in that, Lady Chiltern.

[*They all go out except Sir Robert Chiltern. He sinks into a chair, wrapt in thought. After a little time Lady Chiltern returns to look for him.*]

LADY CHILTERN

[*Leaning over the back of the chair.*] Aren't you coming in, Robert?

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN

[*Taking her hand.*] Gertrude, is it love you feel for me, or is it pity merely?

LADY CHILTERN

[*Kisses him.*] It is love, Robert. Love, and only love. For both of us a new life is beginning.

CURTAIN.